

cronache dal tunnel



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Chronicles from the Tunnel

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What are we talking about

After the implosion of Europe, caught in the geopolitical grip between East and West and undermined by the ineptitude of its ruling class, a new form of social aggregation emerges, first by chance and then out of necessity.

Two centuries after the implosion, the tunnel civilisation is complete. The new social system is rich in individuality but also capable of complex social patterns, where the shadow of the future is long, human groups (and not only) are not too numerous, and the payoff of collaborative patterns is greater than that of deception. A society where non-zero-sum games are the most convenient.

Bitcoin regains its function as a reliable and deflationary currency (perhaps the one for which it was designed), lost in the decades prior to its implosion, when, raped by neoliberalism, it was treated like any other speculative asset. Its proper function is regained thanks to a temporary blitz by its protagonists. The sustainable religion is Pastafarianism, which has wiped out all the pagan sects of the past, without exception.

The setting is the former Brenner Base Tunnel, which has become the centre of a new civilisation, but also a crossroads of experiences bordering on the metaphysical (if not esoteric) and a place of residence for alien and post-human beings with surprising qualities and properties. The tunnel cities, which have sprung up in the former main hubs, are teeming with new life and play a crucial role in repelling the attacks that external, hierarchical but disorganised forces launch against the new civilisation.

The narrative tone is dystopian, irreverent, ironic and parodic, set

in an unexpected dystopian future; perhaps an attempt at sustainable existence. Between a *plural trinitatis*, used consciously by Draula, the alien teenager, and the creation of the first *triumfeminato* in history, as far as we know, the action of the interstitials unfolds. The alien teenager speaks in the plural when referring to herself and her two other aspects, using it in its proper sense, not like the monarchs and popes of the past, who had lost touch with reality. The *triumfeminae* are a team created to negotiate the terms of collaboration between the interstitials and Lucifer, the intelligent lichen that communicates through luminous, circular glyphs emitted in the form of holograms from its photophores. Lucifer seeks help to spread himself across time and space.

The *triumfeminae* were chosen because they are more patient than males and more willing to understand others. Draula's trinity is omniscient and all-seeing, not the first in history but the most interesting. In the Tunnel, there are androids and post-human mutants who share a metabolism based on subatomic particles rather than organic metabolites. Surreal characters appear and disappear, making their colourful contribution to the unfolding events. Events that in the Tunnel move forward (in the direction of time) but also backward. The "vigoressic" genius Marcello Baleno manages (with palindromic inspiration) to combine the overcoming of quantum decoherence with the gravitational power of portable black holes, with the result of inducing waves and time to travel backwards.

After repelling a final attack on the Tunnel's homeostatic balance, two wandering *aruspices* (polyploid and mutant) appear, bringing with them an ominous prophecy for the Tunnel Civilisation.

Chapter 1 — Utica

— Hey Flieg, check out this shot of the main pipe of the Tunnel, as seen through Stromboli's perspective.

— You mean the hawk has cameras instead of eyes, and then sends what it sees to your handheld device?

— Do you find that a bit odd?

— So...

— Not if you think Stromboli is an animaloid – Draula explained.

— Ah! Now it's all clear.

As well as being curious, Flieg had a slight tan because he was a simple reticular, unlike the true interstitial beings who always lived in the tunnel. He sometimes exposed himself to the unpredictable Tyrolean sun. The extra wrinkles around his eyes were the result of all the laughter he had experienced over the past year. His hair was always black and tied in loose braids; he walked in a springy manner both outside and inside the tunnel because he was convinced that girls liked the undulating motion of his braids. He was a Pastafarian, but not a practising one. The early afternoon twilight filtered through the windows of the Termopolium del Corpo Sciolto, which faces the central shaft of the former Brenner base tunnel (now just a tunnel), causing bright cobalt reflections on everything it touched. The friends from the tunnel had decided to celebrate their meeting with Draula, the new arrival, by setting up a table at the Termopolium because they knew well Quinto Fabio Massimo (the owner) and the food was good, provided you could pay.

— How did you get here, Draula, and where are you from? — Tapis

asked, wanting to know.

Tapis was the most interstitial member of the company. He was taller than Flieg and as thin as a Stoic philosopher. He had straight grey hair, grey eyes and a pale complexion. He always wore a multi-purpose jacket, into which he would retreat like a turtle into its shell. He was thoughtful and always seemed in control, even in difficult situations. His thoughts were often about the infinite, things you can't achieve or put into words. He was likeable, even if not the most outgoing, and his grey hair wasn't because he was old, it was because he was interstitial.

— I arrived with the TTQ along with my other aspects: Stromboli, who's always watching and taking notes, and Etna, who you can see inside the yellow plastic ashtray; yep, the dwarf turtle next to the hydroponic lettuce leaf.

Draula, the teenager and new friend of the tunnel gang, showed off her growing breasts under a yellow tank top that matched Etna's ashtray, and a bush of electric blue hair with negative geotropism. Maybe it was a cool hairstyle on her planet, or maybe it was empathy with the upward flight of the micro-antennas protruding from her ears. If her head moved, her blue hair always pointed upwards (or towards infinity), on the opposite side of the centre of the earth. Otherwise, she looked like a normal (normal?) little human, with sodium-yellow skin (the colour of health on her planet), a face resembling an isosceles triangle with the tip pointing downwards, large blue eyes (she looked like a manga character), yellow and black polka dot Bermuda shorts and a slightly frayed vest. She was wearing 3D-printed plastic flip-flops, like all interstitials.

— TTQ Did you say Draula? — Flieg was getting more and more curious.

— Yeah, he said TTQ, which stands for Tele Transport Quantum. — Tapis replied, doing Draula a solid — You know, more or less when the universe crumples up like a biodegradable plastic bag and you can pass from one side of the bag to the other, saving a lot of time and fuel for the journey.

Schwà, the only member of the team with hairy, swollen humps,

wasn't the strangest creature among the customers of the thermopolium. He was leaning on his talking stick like Yoda, his body colour was more of an ochre than a siena, and the hair wasn't just on his humps (all arranged a bit haphazardly) but everywhere except on his face. He wasn't very tall, about 1.2 metres, and before the implosion he would have been called a dwarf, but afterwards no one bothered to define anyone or anything anymore. He spoke like he had something stuck in his mouth, like a Texan, even though he came from the old Switzerland and no one could imagine what had happened there. His metabolism was more like quantum physics than the usual carbon-based thing; basically, he was a mutant.

— Oh! Cool. — Commented Vic, who had many attributes.

What was really striking about Vic was that, for an android, he looked more human than a human. Apart from her full, sensual lips, you couldn't fail to notice her frayed vest, which was on the verge of tearing due to an obvious difficulty in containing his breasts. You could see her curves immediately, they reminded of the golden ratio, and her filled out Bermuda shorts, no matter what colour they were. No one noticed the colour of her recycled plastic flip-flops. But everyone thought her dark eyes were the same colour as her nipples (no one had ever seen them), assuming they even existed. Because she wasn't interstitial (in the strict sense), she didn't have to pay the energy fee, and her blonde hair was long and flowing. Her nose was so straight that it reminded a linear function, even if it softened towards the tip, going more rounded.. And then maybe the way she gathered her long blonde hair into a ponytail, or something in her walk, so sensual, so typical of artificial intelligence, made her the focal point of the tunnel company. Tapis was the first to know that Vic wasn't human. When they were having a bit of a moment together over some hydroponic courgettes, Vic showed him the USB port behind her left ear (she got a bit embarrassed at first, but then she got used to it).

The trade in albino bats was booming. All of Quinto Fabio Massimo's guests had three or five of them, always in odd numbers, on their chitin jackets. Flieg had his own ideas about this odd number; he thought it was a sign of contempt for dualism, which

doesn't exist (according to the interstitial thinking), but he would explore this further later, certainly not during an aperitif before lunch. Some sniffer rats, with their long, colourful fur, crouched at the feet of the humans (seated at the tables) waiting for a good opportunity to wag their tails, like dogs before the implosion. Quinto Fabio, despite being two metres tall and having a huge build, moved almost gracefully from table to table. Under his crumpled chitin apron, stained here and there with grease, he wore a pair of frayed Bermuda shorts from which his legs, as thick as tree trunks, protruded. One of his quadriceps was as big as Tapis' chest and one of his calves was bigger than Flieg's thigh. His belly was all swollen out of his vest, like an airbag at full inflation. He had a big bald head and a lot of long white hair that was tied up in a braid with a chitin ribbon holding it in place. The rest of his body was completely hairless. Only white hair got to grow in the Tunnel. All hair containing melanin was cut and used to generate electricity with the help of bioluminescent bacteria. This meant that only the old, albinos and sniffer rats could grow hair in the Tunnel. If the sniffer rats were shorn, they became depressed and couldn't tell by sniffing whether those outside entering the Tunnel had any diseases or not. A sniffer mouse was better than the tomography used before the implosion. When an outsider came in, they could just by sniffing tell if he was healthy or sick, if he had tooth decay and how many hairs he had on his bum. And then there was another key reason: a depressed sniffer mouse didn't run in the Topodrome, and the interstitials couldn't bet.

Quinto Fabio stopped at every table to explain, in a voice like sandpaper being rubbed against a bathroom wall, how Veronica worked. She wasn't human, android or alien, but a holographic menu that you could smell and hear. The acronym stood for "Very Easy Rapid Oriented New Interesting Challenges Adapter". So, Vic and Schwà had come up with the menu the previous winter from scrap material found in the exploratory tunnel, because they needed to make a few milli-bitcoins to pay the rent. They then gave it to Quinto Fabio in exchange for a month of free dinners for the tunnel company. All you had to do was put it on the table and touch the

icon of the dish. If you wanted to know more, for example about the locust croquettes from the Po Valley (they'd never been seen in the Inn Valley), you just had to tap an icon shaped like a nose and you could smell the aroma of the dish, or with the ear-shaped icon you could hear them sizzling in boiling oil, just as if you were in the kitchen.

Utica was pretty much the same as when they'd left it the year before, just like Termopolium. The city in the middle of the tunnel was covered in a twilight that made it hard for anyone who wasn't part of the city to tell when it was night and when it was day. The other cities in the Tunnel were Qart Hadasht to the north and Zama the Splendid to the south. It was nice to see that some things never change. They'd taken back the old headquarters of the tunnel company, which had been unused in the meantime. Flieg had visited Olivia, who, like the year before, had invited him to stay at her house to help her with her work and share some night-time activities. That was exactly what Flieg had in mind. Whatever else was going on, Flieg was happy to help Olivia, and what he felt for her was the closest thing to a feeling he had ever experienced, although he thought the feeling was temporary (as life itself is). The year before, he'd been struck by the soft roundness of her hair, which was nothing special but nice. Olivia was an interstitial and paid her hair tribute for energy production. Flieg was fascinated because she hadn't shaved her head, but had left her hair a couple of centimetres long. You couldn't tell whether her hair was naturally round or if it was Olivia's talent for cutting that gave it that perfect roundness. With her round hair and Oriental-style eyes, Flieg had the air of someone who had a pretty good grasp on the idea of the universe being pretty much infinite. He was lost in her eyes, which were as black as the black hole at the centre of the Milky Way. He could see traces of ancient Semitic ancestry in her aquiline nose, and her lips, which made him think of irresistible nocturnal pleasures, convinced him that he was with someone special. He was chatting to her about chitin tableware in her shop on the central canal. Olivia's breasts also played a role in the opening of the negotiations (courtship), or rather how they moved under her tank top as she

talked about plates, forks and recycled plastic. She was also an honorary member of the tunnel company.

Having already ordered some moth croquettes, some stew of unknown origin, and some more vegetarian options with Veronica's help, Draula was carefully placing the 3D-printed plastic ashtray on the table as a bed for Etna, the dwarf tortoise and his second aspect. Then she started telling her story, without anyone asking her to, after taking one last look at her handheld device, which was showing images of the tunnel just outside the Temopolium that Stromboli (her third aspect) was sending continuously.

The planet was called Trantor and was a few light years away. He couldn't remember how many light years, but it didn't matter anyway, given the quantum crumpling that was just meant to be. Well, Draula always said it wasn't a total collapse of the universe. It was more like a transformation into a wave, you know? Since you were everywhere and nowhere, you could decide to appear here, there, or wherever you wanted, and then transform back into something solid.

— Ah... like drinking a cappuccino.

— Come on... let her talk — said Olivia, who was pragmatic being a woman.

— But isn't becoming a wave reserved for tiny things, like photons or something like that? — Tapis, always attentive, interjected.

Draula continued his story, claiming that Tapis had been right before Marcello Baleno's time. Marcello had found a solution to decoherence — the phenomenon that prevents macroscopic bodies from becoming waves — and had become famous ever since. Then a certain Pisum took advantage of this to invent TTQ (also known as PMB). Conversely, when a human — or indeed any living or inanimate object — could transform into a wave, it would be possible, with a little more work, to make it materialise elsewhere. It is said that Pisum wanted to solve the problem of the cost of fuel for travel on his planet and in the universe once and for all with the invention of the wave function. His famous comment on the finished work was: 'A small saving for one man, a great saving for humanity.' Once he had confirmed that it worked, he chose not to comment

further, instead building the first PMB (Pisum Marcello Baleno) system and releasing it with a user manual (a white paper) to avoid questions and hassle from the inevitable curious onlookers, and thus enjoying his well-deserved ability to travel without worrying about fossil fuels or renewable energy sources.

— But can you have sex when you're in a wave state?

— Flieggy, must you always be the same?

Ignoring Flieg's scientific curiosity and Olivia's comment, Draula continued his story, cuddling Etna and, in a rather human gesture, running his hands through his electric blue hair, even though it didn't need it. 'It seems that, since then, all traces of this Pisum have been lost,' he said. In all likelihood, he was sightseeing or preferred to remain in wave state to escape tedious things such as authority — one of the most tedious universal constants if centralised; if distributed, however, it's another matter entirely. The important thing was that he had made the PMB system available. By setting Pisum's wave function, it allowed you to be wherever you wanted without having to refuel first.

Given that on Trantor, Draula continued, in addition to a rather well-stocked imperial library that might even be useful to them, there was a government (the existence of a government is in itself a bad thing) that had the strange idea of digitising all biological beings at puberty, in order to guarantee everyone the advantage of eternal life (at least as long as there was electricity) through the suppression of the biological part (death). Since Draula did not like this, she agreed with Etna and Stromboli to move there with the PMB System. She moved there primarily because they were nice, and secondly because she believed that the absence of rainfall or weather threats was an added bonus.

Nobody in the tunnel company knew what a government was, but the fact that Draula spoke ill of it convinced them that these entities had evil intentions, which were fortunately unknown to them. Flieg, in particular, was not at all convinced that digital sex was as enjoyable as biological sex, and he was the most vocal supporter of the idea that it was evil. However, Draula insisted that they all needed to know who, or rather what, Etna and Stromboli were. The

hawk perched outside the Termopolium transmitted images of what was happening in the tunnel to Draula's handheld device. These images were captured by Stromboli's eyes, which were actually qCams (quantum video cameras), as he was the equivalent of an android for humans, an animaloid. Draula couldn't say whether this term was used more out of respect for animals or humans, but that's how it was. Since we were talking about qCams, you could put a q (quantum prefix) in front of anything they referred to. While classic information travelled around the internet at the miserable speed of light, qInformation could take all possible routes instead of just one, so it arrived safely and sooner. In short, whether Stromboli and Draula were ten metres apart or one in a tunnel and the other in the Boomerang Nebula (the coldest place in the universe, where no one in their right mind would want to be) the information arrived safely and quickly. But there was more: Draula always said that even Etna was a little special. Also by derivation, it was a qTurtle, and for this very reason, even though it looked harmless and usually slept or ate or existed in a wave state, it was in the qCloud with all the other dwarf turtles in the universe. Together, they guarded the physical history of the universe from the Big Bang to the present day. For example, if you wanted to go on a space tour via PMB, you would need to ask Etna whether the planet you wanted to visit was still accessible or had been swallowed by a black hole or pulverised by a giant asteroid.

— Before you ask me, Flieggy, I'll tell you that I can communicate with Etna, but Etna cannot communicate with Stromboli, while I can communicate with both of them.

Draula was socially adept. She called Flieg by the nickname that Olivia had just invented for him and immediately fit in with the tunnel crew. Speaking in her high-pitched teenage voice and smiling at Flieg, she won him over as she pointed to the small but visible antennae on her ears with her alien hands.

— These are two upside-down chips.

— Upside-down?

— Yes, in the sense that they are both under and over the skin.

Since, as we all know by now, the government of our planet has bad

intentions, they implant chips in you at birth to get ahead of the game with digitalisation, so you are immediately connected and can get used to your digital future. They are useful for communicating with Etna and Stromboli, though.

— Ah! So you are one and three. — Tapis pointed out with his usual sharpness. The others listened attentively without intervening because they had started eating.

But, slurp, when the three of you become one, do you all turn into waves together? — Asked Vic, whose curiosity about human affairs was well known, his mouth full of stew. Despite being an artificial intelligence and therefore, by definition, an android, as well as having a nice bottom, big breasts and full lips, she had a formidable appetite. It was suspected that, with Schwà's help, she had found a way to transform the food she swallowed into five-volt direct current. In fact, no one ever saw her plug herself into a USB port.

— Well done! — Draula said, surprised — excellent intuition!

— Affinity dear, you are digitising, I am digital.

— Oh!

With this single word, Draula emphasised her satisfaction at having had the right intuition about where to go after escaping from Trantor. She also demonstrated her strong biological instincts by devouring a portion of stew while chatting and nudging Vic and Olivia, who were sitting next to her. For the occasion, Vic had tied her hair back into a blonde ponytail, while Olivia ate contentedly, her face beaming in harmony with the pi-invoking roundness of her hairstyle. Draula sat between the two of them, with Etna nearby. Her blue hair always pointed upwards, even when she bent over her plate.

Not that finding somewhere to stay was a problem, because, as Draula had explained, if necessary they could (she spoke in the plural because of her trinity) transform themselves into waves and thus be everywhere and nowhere, only to reappear in the morning for breakfast. But they were still up for staying with Vic, Schwà and Wende. They had a connection (one was digital and the other almost), and they were both women so might understand each other better. There was plenty of space in Vic's apartment, not far from

the Topodromo (where the big sniffing mouse races took place), because Schwà loved to sleep in the nearby hydroponic greenhouse, saying that the bubbling of the circulating solution helped his sleep. He might also wake up hungry at night, in which case he could have a snack with the exhausted water, which is full of catabolites. As we all know, his metabolism was more about particle physics than organic chemistry. Wende, the last full member of the company, had been in a catatonic state since the previous year and stayed where you put him without moving or complaining. When he wasn't in a coma, he was a sturdy guy, two fingers shorter than Vic (which is why he wore reinforced sandals, like Augustus) and hopelessly in love with her. His lost love was clear in his dreamy grey eyes, which went well with his slightly large nose and his well-cooked brick-red hair, even if it wasn't very thick. He was quite introverted (when he wasn't in a coma), but now he's chillin' in his hydroponic pod. Inside the pod, he got nutrients through devices attached to his skin, and every now and then a burst of electricity stirred his nerves and muscles because movement is always good. The hydroponic pod (much better than its cryogenic cousins) was another invention of the brilliant Marcello Baleno. Vic felt responsible for Wende, so he kept him with Schwà. When they travelled, they loaded their stuff (the hydroponic pod and Wende) onto a Trapois, which was actually a Travois (the kind used by Native Americans), but with two dark chitin wheels added thanks to Tapis's gut sense. They christened it Trapois right away, in his honour. The hydroponic pod had a nutrient hopper that Vic refilled every day with various metabolites, adding half a glass of red wine once a week to encourage Wende's dream production, if there was any.

What was worrying the tunnel company, which had been enriched by the mysterious and charming triune object (Draula and its other aspects), was that Wende still didn't know that Vic was an android, even though he was well-built. This could cause problems if Wende decided to come out of his catatonic state and start living normally (?). As soon as they had a spare moment, they'd have a think about the problem. At the latest, when Wende woke up. Meanwhile, just outside the Termopolium and just above the entrance, the hologram

of the day that Quinto Fabio had created emitted purple flashes: chops, ribs and sausages sizzling evoked Hades, if not some kind of pandemonium of simoniacal priests. Once they were cooked, they'd just start again from the beginning, in a constant cycle of change. That was, until Quinto Fabio Massimo turned off the power. Stromboli, perched on his mobile perch made of chitin, was insensitive to the hologram's luciferian glows. He saw and recorded everything without making anyone sign the privacy form.

The dim light illuminated the tunnel, which ran north-south like a large cardus, whose short decumani were escape routes, when there were any. At the northern end, the Pastafarian church occupied almost the entire curved section of the tunnel, while to the south, the masculine tower of the Assassins' mansio served as a counterpoint. The relationship between Pastafarians and Assassins was ambiguous, in the sense that one day they would be slapping each other around and the next day they would be kissing each other on the mouth. In any case, their coexistence was convenient for everyone because the Assassins were ready to slice up any threat to the tunnel with their long knives in exchange for food and shelter. In between were the simple interstitial beings who minded their own business.

Chapter 2 — Exploratio Propellente

— Not bad as a hologram, don't you think, Drauli?

Even in the Tunnel, two hundred years after Europe fell apart, the use of the diminutive (Drauli) meant that you'd moved from just being acquaintances, albeit not superficially, to being friends. This was all the more surprising given that it was between two post-human entities who were observing the hologram glowing in the semi-darkness of the tunnel, above the door of Draula's new office in the central tube of the former Brenner Base Tunnel.

— I'd say it's perfect, Vicky. It features my favourite colours as well as my additional aspects.

Draula returned the friendly gesture. As she spoke, she really drove home the short and long vowels, because she believed they had different influences on the listener's soul. This made her a sensitive being as well as a triune and alien one. She was clearly aware of this, as she talked about the hawk and the turtle in the hologram as if they were different aspects of her. The sodium yellow background, the colour of health on Trantor, didn't stand out at all against the plutonic light of the central cane. The bright blue hawk with its wings spread made you feel like it knew everything and didn't care about your privacy, and it looked powerful against the background. The tired green of the turtle reminded of ancient wisdom and the ability to know everything, and it went perfectly with the yellow background. Basically, it was a successful work

containing a semi-circular phrase floating in cyberspace that read: Exploratio propellente Draula, which was like saying: Draula Investigation Agency.

That morning, after the cappuccino but before creating the hologram, Vic had decided to put her hair in a braid and then had a look in the mirror with that graceful air that only AI can muster. She was happy with what she'd done, so she checked the nutrient level in Wende's pod hopper and topped it up with a handful of different metabolites that Schwà had given her. Draula, on the other hand, was ready right after the cappuccino, which she seemed to appreciate to a certain extent. But when something's really good, everyone loves it. She didn't need to comb her hair, so she gently parked Etna in the ashtray made of recycled plastic, then put everything in her backpack without the turtle noticing. Etna had fallen asleep straight after eating her first leaf of hydroponic lettuce that morning; as far as Vic and Schwà knew, she could well have been in contact with her colleagues at qCloud instead of sleeping. Stromboli, ever vigilant, waited on his perch just outside the door. Draula's trinity was a mystery that no one could really understand, and people had to accept it for what it was; trying to figure it out with the brains would get people nowhere. Nor would it get them anywhere to try to understand why Draula's pyjamas were the same as the shorts and frayed tank top she had just worn, the only difference being the 3D-printed flip-flops. Vic just thought it was something Trantor did, and didn't say anything so as not to offend the little Trina's alien sensibilities.

— Well done, girls, you've really smashed it. I hope you haven't had breakfast yet... I thought I'd bring some snacks to share. Olivia, do you have that ebonised folding chitin table with you?

— Give me a moment to fix it, Flieg. Oh! What a splendid hologram!

Flieg wore his best Bermuda shorts for the inauguration. They were blue with vertical white stripes, and looked like the pinstripes worn by businessmen of yesteryear, or even mafia bosses. His flip-flops were blue and he was wearing a grey tank top. Olivia's vest top wasn't so much noticeable for its colour as for how revealing it was,

which matched the Bermuda shorts, which weren't particularly elegant but were certainly eye-catching. The colour of her flip-flops wasn't important. Tapis had come up with the idea for the agency the night before at dinner, after a glass of Mikos, the mushroom grappa that had become the second sacred drink of the Pastafarians, after beer. He didn't know how yet, but he was sure they'd figure out how to use Draula's omniscience and all-embracing vision to earn a few milli-bitcoins sooner or later. In the meantime, why not open the office? Everyone liked the idea, so they decided to take action the next day.

In the Tunnel, there were no authorities (?) sticking their noses into what people wanted to do. It took just enough time to create the hologram, set up a work table and a couple of chairs in the warehouse that Olivia had lent to Draula, and the Agency was up and running. Flieg had gone to raise awareness among Quinto Fabio Massimo, who had agreed to supply snacks on credit, while Tapis had contacted Tonino, the Bevend from the Pastafarian church, convincing him that a donation of fresh beer could only benefit relations between Pastafarians and simple interstitials. That day was not Friday, and Tapis had found Tonino in plain clothes, which meant he was not dressed as a pirate. However, he had a dark chitin strap around his neck with a fish bone hanging from it that looked real, even though it was 3D printed from off-white recycled plastic. Since he had a belly second only to Quinto Fabio's, the fish bone was never vertical, but seemed to be sitting on the Beverend's vest; the vest seemed to be fighting against his abdomen to avoid tearing the fabric. Pastafarians emulated and loved pirates, which is why they had a licence to keep their beards long, because no one had ever seen a pirate without a beard; Tonino's beard reached down to the fish bone. Their hair, however, had to be taken to the technical room of the former Brenner Base Tunnel for conversion into energy. Tonino, in fact, had a shaved head. Otherwise, he was indistinguishable from a simple interstitial, with standard Bermuda shorts and flip-flops. In the energy room, as the former technical room was called, generations of bioluminescent bacteria worked to extract the electrons necessary To make the Tunnel go. But they also

organised parties and visits to relatives, at least in the short span of their lives, like everyone else.

The Topodromo was really close to Draula's new office and Olivia's shop too. Olivia sold cute and useful little items made by 3D printing micro-fragments of coloured plastic that were everywhere: in the air, in the water, in beer and in underwear. Vic and Schwà had built the printer the previous year from scrap material found somewhere and modified it to recycle the micro-fragments. So while Olivia made a few milli-bitcoins selling kitchen utensils, she also did her bit for the environment by removing micro-fragments of plastic. This wasn't the case for many human activities, though.

— Not bad as a hologram, don't you think, Tapis?

— Not bad at all, Tonino... you can put the beer keg behind the table, thank you.

Tonino had accompanied Tapis because he was curious to see the little alien, but also to carry the barrel of beer. Tapis's propensity for speculation had narrowed his shoulders, and he couldn't manage it alone. The two were thick as thieves. Tapis had created the famous mushroom grappa (Mikos) which, after the first glass, relaxes you, the second makes you feel like you're in heaven, and the third puts you in a coma. The duumviri (as they were called) had come up with the idea for the agency together. It seems that Tonino had pointed out to Tapis, between a beer and a pat on the back, that in Utica, which was still the main town in the Tunnel, a detective agency was useless because everyone did what they wanted, with whom they wanted and when they wanted. And no one had anything to say about it, Tonino argued, because we are all one. So we do what we want, with whom we want, and when we want, and that's that. However, the agency could be useful to cover Utica's and all the interstitial's backs. If it was true that in the north the metalheads would still be licking their wounds for a while after the beating they took last autumn, it was also true that the assassins were getting restless. Maybe it was just a hormonal thing, but you should never underestimate a feeling. So the much-vaunted omniscience etc. of our new triune friend (or is he just one? I'm not sure, but if you say so...) could come in handy. Because if they see everything and know

everything, then they can predict everything.

— Flieggy... we need more canapés.

— All right, Olivia, I'll take care of it.

The dim light illuminated the tunnel with a plutonic glow, and every interstitial passing by stopped to eat canapés and crispy, delicious hydroponic vegetables, but also to drink Tonino's beer and a glass of Mikos, albeit cautiously. Everyone liked the hologram, even though they had no idea what it meant. However, there was not even a shadow of an assassin to be seen. If you looked closely, it was not just shadows that were missing, but also the cobalt glint that their knives gave off. In addition to their (black) beards, the assassins carried knives that they knew how to use well, as had been seen last autumn when they had sliced up many of the metalheads who had besieged Qart Hadasht. Tapis promised himself he would think about the absence of the glint of the assassins' knives in the semi-darkness of the Tunnel as soon as he had a moment. For now, it was more enjoyable to eat, drink and slap each other on the back in celebration, in the company of the tunnel and everyone else who happened to be passing by, to mark the opening of Draula's new agency.

The Agency at work

— Look at those cute little animals, Flieggy, and what beautiful coloured fur they have.

— Well, Drauli... they weigh at least 50 kilos, but their fur is stunning.

The morning chatter drifted in through the agency windows opening onto the tunnel. Vic and Schwà had gone to inspect the service tunnel beneath the central shaft, looking for materials or ideas for their inexhaustible creativity. Tapis had gone to visit Tonino in the Pastafarian church to discuss business and organise caravans of goods between Utica and other cities via the service tunnel. Draula, Flieg and Olivia were having breakfast at the agency with cappuccino and breaded and fried mushroom croquettes made

according to an interstitial recipe. Etna was sleeping in his coloured plastic ashtray to recover from the fatigue of his meal: a leaf of hydroponic lettuce fresh with dew. Stromboli, gliding out of the tunnel, was exploring the surroundings of the entrance (or exit, depending on the mood of the observer). The animaloid's quantum eyes were caught by what Draula called cute little animals, which were rooting around among the young larch trees growing in a clearing. The images appeared on Draula's handheld device and she showed them to her friends.

— The cute little animals rooting around in the woods are wild boars... and there are lots of them.

The images from Stromboli, captured by Draula's micro-antennas, were triangulated with Etna and reproduced on the handheld device. The turtle, which appeared to be sleeping, was always connected to the qCloud of all the other dwarf turtles in the universe. Everyone thought that the antenna was in its tail, partly because no other protuberances were visible and partly because it occasionally stood up suspiciously, becoming so vertical that it looked radioactive. The information transmitted enriched the large universal database of white noise, available to anyone. Etna was the omniscient aspect of Draula, while Stromboli was the all-seeing aspect. Together, they constituted the mystery of the trinity; perhaps not the first in history, but certainly the most interesting. Stromboli was better than the drones of the past because it didn't need remote control. You told it what to do and it did it, often creatively. All it needed was a USB port to recharge. The pens and feathers were artificial but looked real.

— Drauli, I'm getting an idea.

— Show her, Flieggy... show her.

Beverendo Tonino had insisted late in the morning that Tapis try, free of charge, the sacrament of Pastafarian communion. So Tapis, who usually just nibbled at his food, had to wolf down (in peace) a generous plate of spaghetti with meat sauce, noting two things: that Pastafarian communion was pleasant and satisfying, not tasteless and transparent like the communion wafers of old, and that it was now afternoon and he could return to the agency, having settled his

business in an appropriate manner.

It is always challenging to determine the exact time in the Tunnel. The pure reticularians, perhaps basing their judgement on micro-variations in the leaden glow of the twilight, always seem certain of the time. That afternoon, the members of the Company were also certain, because Tapis claimed he needed a glass of Mikos to metabolise the spaghetti with meat sauce he had eaten for lunch. After listening to Flieg's idea, Tapis had expressed his opinion: Draula and his other aspects would create a map of the paths most frequently used by wild boars, which was easier said than done, and then the difficult part would begin. Given the bad temper that the wild boars had shown, not to mention their belligerent appearance, it would be necessary to sedate them in order to shave them. Hypnosis was immediately ruled out due to the subjects' irascibility, leaving only drugged mushroom croquettes or the psilocybin-laced psychoactive slingshot. The croquettes were tedious to prepare, so it was unanimously decided to go with the psychoactive slingshot, considering that Tapis was the foremost expert on psychotropic mushrooms around, and the slingshot was his invention. Bringing the melanin-rich fur to the energy room could earn a few milli-bitcoins.

- But is a slingshot safe, Tap?
- Just throw the psychoactive ball onto the skin of the animals, Flieg, but also onto their fur, because then it melts and penetrates.
- What if someone makes a mistake?
- Eh, if you make a mistake, you have to explain yourself to the wild boars.
- Gosh... better not make a mistake...
- You could always hide like a quail, or climb a tree and shoot from there. — Vic suggested, showing interest in the matter.
- Yes, yes, the tree is better...
- Anyway... — Tapis continued — once psilocybin enters the bloodstream, it's as if the boar had taken morphine, or drunk two bottles of prosecco or half a flask of vodka.
- Got it, become friendly, outgoing and maybe willing to cooperate. Am I right?

— You've hit the nail on the head, Flieg...

— But can we um... practise a little first?

The Contubernium da Marius was a recently opened bar near the emergency exit (or entrance) of the tunnel, and it was said that you could find an unbeatable cappuccino there, just like in Italy in the old days. Marius Decanus was a big man with a shaved head, communicating to the world that he was an orthodox interstitial and paid his energy dues. White hair puffed out from his vest and armpits, even though he wasn't that old. To some extent, his appearance evoked a satyr, or someone who had participated in too many Dionysian rituals, perhaps because of his mocking smile and slanted eyes. As if that weren't enough, he had a bad temper and very strict rules: he decided the menu and there always had to be eight paying guests. This meant that if a group of four, five or six arrived, they always had to pay for eight. But since this rule didn't apply in the morning and he served delicious, fragrant croissants, they decided to have breakfast and the theory course at his place.

As soon as breakfast was over, Tapis had instructed Draula, Flieg and Vic, who had expressed interest in participating in the event, on how to use the slingshot. Some artificial intelligences had an insatiable curiosity. Olivia had preferred to stay in the shop because she had things to do, and besides, she claimed that hunting was not for girls. Vic, not belonging to that category (although anyone who didn't know he was an android would have sworn he was), could participate without any problems. Schwà didn't like open spaces where the air was too pure and fresh, so he preferred to continue exploring the service tunnel or relax in the hydroponic greenhouse where he could listen to the bubbling of the circulating solution, which reminded him of white noise.

Vic found it exciting to shoot pebbles with his psychoactive slingshot at chitin targets shaped like wild boars. They shot pebbles to save psilocybin, i.e. they fired blanks during the practical part of the course. Every time she hit the target, she jumped for joy, putting a strain on the fabric of her vest, which was already on the verge of tearing. Draula, after parking her other aspects, committed herself to throwing pebbles at the targets with the energy of a teenager, her

tongue sticking out of her mouth emphasising her commitment. Between hits, Flieg pointed out to the group that hunting (?) was exciting, but that it could also rain or some other climatic accident could fall on their heads. He also hoped that there were no streams nearby to slip into, perhaps while carrying a backpack on his shoulders. In short, they had to be careful.

At lunchtime, they ate the hunter's fritters that Tapis had bought that morning at the thermopolium. For once, they were sure of the time because they were outside the Tunnel. Tapis was also certain that they were ready for a real hunt. Flieg had decided to keep his doubts to himself this time, following the group towards the ambush site. Stromboli's cybernetic brain, on the other hand, had no doubts as he guided Draula and the others towards the ambush clearing while Etna was absorbed in her tactical backpack. Fortunately, the clearing was not so far away and there were no treacherous streams nearby. The only unknown factor remaining was the dose of psilocybin in the cartridges. Tapis had calculated it theoretically, estimating that the same dose needed to alter the psyche of a puny human would be required.

Towards late afternoon in the outside world, three wild boars (one for each hunter) trotted happily towards their respective dens, without their fur but with a certain gratitude towards life for allowing them to experience such an interesting adventure. This proved that Tapis had got the dose of psilocybin just right. Draula's detective agency had been transformed, after just one day in business, into a wild boar hunting agency (for hair). As they returned safely to the tunnel, everyone wondered what other wonders the interstitial future had in store for them, and how many milli-bitcoins they would earn for that melanin-rich hair.

Galina Darla Vaseлина

— Hello friends, how are you? My name is Galina Darla Vaseлина, but everyone calls me Cassandra. I am an ornithologist (bird expert).

The dull glow of the agency had been reduced by half a lumen

because Galina Vaseleva was standing right in the doorway, preventing the early morning semi-darkness from entering with the necessary vigour. Her legs were crooked as if she had spent the last few years riding a donkey, her hair looked like corn cobs arranged haphazardly in a vague bob, and instead of wearing a multi-purpose jacket like Tapis or a tank top like everyone else, she was wearing a kind of tattered chiton with a rope belt around her waist.

— Greeting to you, Galina the bird whisperer. May we offer you something since we are having breakfast?

Early in the morning, Flieg had been to the energy hall to deposit the fur he had sheared the day before and receive an infinitesimal fraction of a milli-bitcoin. Then he had stopped by Quinto Fabio Massimo to pay for the snacks he had bought on credit two days earlier, and his last stop had been Marius Decanus to buy crispy, fragrant pastries for breakfast. Tapis had gone to see Tonino at the Pastafarian church to give him a couple of bottles of Mikos, as a token of gratitude for the beer he had donated on the day the agency opened. They then met up with Draula and her other aspects for breakfast. Vic and Schwà were already out and about looking for inspiration, or objects to recycle into something useful.

— I would like board and lodging for three days. In exchange, I can predict your future; what interests you: sex, love, marital infidelity, business or anything else? I saw your falcon flying outside and I am sure I can make positive predictions. With board and lodging for two days, the predictions would be so-so, while with just one day, you would receive a not-so-good prediction. So, what would you prefer? — Said Galina Darla Vaseleva, narrowing her blue eyes to two slits and curling her upper lip. The existence of her upper lip was only noticeable when she curled it and revealed suspicious canines.

— Sit down, Galina, we'll talk about it over breakfast.

In the normal leaden light, restored now that Galina had moved away from the door, Draula's Bermuda shorts and tank top were more noticeable than before. She was vain as well as alien, and loved to change her appearance frequently. Perhaps she returned to Trantor at night to pick up new clothes and leave the old ones

behind, or perhaps she had transferred everything everywhere and nowhere (in wave form) and changed when she felt like it. That day was the moment of the imenottera drift, and she was wearing a black and yellow striped outfit; her electric blue hair, etc., reassured people of her identity, as she could have been mistaken for a wasp. Flieg and Tapis were dressed more soberly and interstitially. Galina Darla Vaselineva sat next to the little alien and occasionally looked at her, Etna in the yellow ashtray and Stromboli perched on the portable perch near the door. Stromboli had not yet noticed the ornithomancer's (particular) attention.

Between one croissant and another, Galina, who took the three days of board and lodging for granted, having heard nothing to the contrary, said she was certain that the group would enjoy days of glory and prestige. That's why they could afford a second round of croissants, which were really delicious. Based on the flight of the bird, which she had been able to observe, she argued that they should pay attention to anything that could have a double meaning, but that they should not ask for anything else because observing the flight alone did not allow for greater precision.

— Maybe if you let me dissect it... um, I mean inspect it more closely (referring to Stromboli), I mean look at it closely, I could be more precise. — Said Vaselineva, looking first at Flieg, then at Tapis and finally at Draula. Meanwhile, Stromboli had shuddered among his feathers and taken a step sideways on his perch, lowering and raising his beak like any ordinary parrot.

— You'll have to settle for watching him fly. — Draula said coldly. Even Etna had woken up and was watching Galina Darla Vaselineva as only a dwarf tortoise can.

— Draula's features are untouchable. — Tapis specified, as solemn as a gravestone.

— Oh! It was just a hypothesis, my friends, — clarified the ornithologist — even without... um... inspecting the bird, what I said still stands. Soon you will have a big two-way deal on your hands. You will have to make a complicated journey full of side effects, but in the end you will be satisfied. Because, as always, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Ah! You'll also have to scratch your bum

before it starts itching. Now, if you'd like to show me where I can settle in, that would be nice, I'm a little tired. By the way... what time is lunch?

Chapter 3 — Marcello Baleno

- Are you Marcello Baleno? The Marcello Baleno I mean.
- So they say. And who are you? I can see for myself that you are a woman, beautiful, indeed charming, with black eyes and an oriental face that has never been seen in Utica.
- I'm Calypso, and you're right about my face.
- Because it's oriental or because we've never seen it before?
- Both of them.

Marcello Baleno's house was not far from the service entrance to the tunnel, where, before the implosion, you could enter or exit quickly depending on your mood. You could even say that it was in the centre of the tunnel, since the two doors, Qart Hadasht to the north and Zama to the south, were about the same distance away. In short, Marcello Baleno's house was in the middle of Utica, which in turn was in the middle of the tunnel. Perhaps this had some esoteric meaning, or perhaps not. In any case, Calypso came from the far south (outside the tunnel) and had travelled quickly along the service duct, stopping only to eat, doze and urinate in the drainage grates located every 500 metres. She was not tired, but she was a little weary, so she entered without asking permission. She also had a certain personality as well as charm.

Marcello didn't notice her right away because he was busy with a cybernetic task that required concentration. That his dominant pathology was "vigorexia" was evident from the rounded muscles that burst out of his tank top and Bermuda shorts, always on the verge of tearing at the level of his quadriceps. As a good orthodox

interstitial, he paid his hair tribute to the energy room, so his head was shaved and his skull was almost perfectly spherical, evoking pi if not the golden ratio. He ate at least ten times a day in order to continuously supply his mitochondria with various metabolites and kick them in the ass if they slacked off.

The part of the loft bordered by the curved wall of the Tunnel was embellished with a series of rust-coloured pipes of different diameters, satin-finished just enough to give off that dystopian warmth. For the rest, arranged more or less at random, there were benches, dumbbells, treadmills and who knows what else. The dim light that entered through the large window overlooking the tunnel and illuminated the harmonious chaos of the loft with brushstrokes of plutonic light was interrupted only by a bioluminescent lamp on the desk where he was working before Calipso the Oriental entered. The bathroom had a door. Among Marcello's recessive pathologies, a couple were noteworthy: he loved to build cybernetic organisms that were skilled at preparing his protein concoctions (and remembering to do so), and he had a compulsion to organise orgasms. Perhaps this was why he was looking at Calipso with interest. She had introduced herself abruptly to Marcello, without freshening up or changing her clothes, aware that her charm could (and should) be enough. She wore inconspicuous travel shorts, more comfortable than elegant, which failed to hide her curves, while her vest was a touch of class: made of treated chitin and rendered semi-transparent, it gave her that hint of lasciviousness that was hypnotising Marcello. Marcello was convinced that Calipso's black hair was not a wig and that her tan was not the result of living in a tunnel. Calipso's face could be circumscribed by any golden rectangle, and her nose, aquiline just enough, evoked the Middle East before the implosion; she wore rather pretty question mark-shaped dangling earrings, in a colour reminiscent of curious anticipation.

— I've heard a lot about you. They say you invented a way to travel wherever you want for very little money. I'd love to know more. Could I stay here for a while and make you coffee and keep you warm at night in return?

— If by coffee you mean espresso, I would say that there is no problem, while for nights it is fine as it is. I assume, charming lady, that you are referring to the PMB portal, i.e. that thing that allows you to travel almost anywhere without worrying about fuel. If so, you are welcome. As you can see, my house is a bit chaotic, but I'm sure I can make room for you (really?).

As Marcello Baleno's assistant, Calipso shouldn't have had to cut her hair to scrape together a few milli-bitcoins. He would have been generous and, in exchange for espresso and warm nights, he would have created and supplied her with a wallet full of milli-bitcoins for her small expenses. In return, she would have worked with dedication and skill on the portal (where Draula had arrived along with her other aspects). Travelling with Baleno's portal was free (freedom of movement was considered by the interstitials to be a primary good, not monetisable), but not many people used it. Calipso, on the other hand, said she would do so frequently to obtain exotic food, wine unknown in the galaxy, fruit from distant worlds close to the event horizon, or objects made of bone or alien wood, which she would then trade at the central cane market.

Marcello Baleno had been quick (*cognomen omen*) in finding a comfortable place to share with Calipso (who wouldn't have been?), surprising even himself with the purchase of a fan at the market to keep the air moving and ward off bad smells; now that Calipso was there. In addition to being equipped with yellow recycled plastic threads knotted to the grille, which floated in the direction of the air, the fan had a strobe light function that created a very alcove-like effect. He had placed it near the bed, widened at the expense of the dumbbell rack, and under the dystopian pipes of different diameters and rust colours that ran along the curved wall. It also had a USB port for charging.

About two centuries after the implosion, life in the Tunnel was pretty boring. Generations of bioluminescent bacteria kept stealing electrons from the melanin that generations of interstitial carried to the energy room, producing electricity for the whole place. The twilight of day continually turned into night without either the bacteria or the interstitial beings asking themselves any existential

questions. Everything ran smoothly and, apart from external threats, such as last year's Metal attack, which was successfully foiled, public opinion among the interstitial beings was fairly satisfied. Then Draula the trina arrived and opened a detective agency (Exploratio propellente). This was a sort of thermocline between before and after, but even worse: like when, shortly before the implosion of the Euro and Europe, the role of adults as a source of information for young humans was replaced by ChatGpt and the like. At the time, it seemed like a good thing, as it can be tiring to keep people informed, but it had created monsters. In the tunnel, the impact was less, life had changed from soporific to frenetic, albeit only to a certain extent.

Some interstitial beings had thought of investing a little time in wild boar hunting (to fur of) and earning milli-bitcoins by bringing it to the energy room. Since a minimum of training and practical testing was required to use the psychoactive slingshot, Tapis and Tonino got organised. The courses were held at the agency and Tonino provided the beer in exchange for infinitesimal fractions of bitcoin. The registration fee was two beers, or one beer and a shot of Mikos, which you had to pay for before drinking. This was justified by the fact that the effects of mushroom grappa varied from person to person. The purchase was guaranteed in any case, in the sense that if someone passed out after the shot of Mikos, as soon as they regained consciousness they could continue the course, even if they woke up the next day.

Stromboli Ottimo Massimo had long since completed his reconnaissance of the surroundings of all the tunnel exits, and Draula, with Tapis's help, had created a map of the furred game, which was provided to all participants in the training course. At Tapis's suggestion, Stromboli and the others had carried out reconnaissance in the far north to see if everything was in order in the metal areas. Draula the trina had emphasised that the autonomy of his additional aspect was not unlimited and, to avoid having to retrieve him, for example by recharging him with a USB power bank, he should not be encouraged to fly beyond his limit; this could happen because he (Stromboli etc.) was generous to the point of

recklessness. But everything had gone well and the animaloid's real-time report had been more than positive, there was no sign of suspicious movements and they had not had to retrieve it. This coincided with Tapis' prediction, while Stromboli inspected the Inn valley near the former Orrido del Sill. Everything would be quiet, Tapis had claimed, because the metalheads had taken such a beating that they wouldn't be seen south of the former Bavaria for a few years.

After a week of hunting furred game, Stromboli's frequent reconnaissance flights revealed a somewhat curious situation. Instead of passing by chance through the ambush sites, as the humans called them, the furred game, wild boars, gathered there waiting for the hunters. When the hunters arrived, the wild boars let themselves be sheared with docility, exposing their hindquarters to receive the psychic slingshot blow. In the end, everyone went on their way happy. On the other hand, it is well known that panpsychism attributes consciousness not only to animals but also to inanimate objects. It is a short step from consciousness to critical thinking, and the wild boars showed that they understood what was happening and made decisions to benefit both themselves and the humans. This certainly cannot be said of many humans in the past with regard to animals (and other things). They should also be credited with pragmatism, which relegates the liturgy of hunting to a useless accessory, preferring to get straight to the point.

At the Contubernium by Marius

— Vaselina left a week ago and we still don't understand what she meant by that two-way thing.

— Vasinova Flieg, her name was Galina Darla Vasinova.

— Ah, OK, Tap, thanks for clarifying. Anyway, bidirectional makes me think of reciprocating motion, like something that goes up and down, or back and forth, like a piston... you know what I mean?

— Flieg, please...

- What's up, Olivia? It's a scientific hypothesis.
- Sure, why didn't you think of something different, like a palindrome?
- Um... that's a good idea, Olivia. But what's a palindrome?

It was customary for the tunnel company to dine together at least a couple of times a week to cement their team spirit, like the Spartan hoplites. Instead of the infamous black slop, however, there was a menu decided by Marius Decanus, since they had decided to meet at the Contubernium. As always, Marius provided eight places, no more and no less. The decanus belonged to the old guard and refused to consider the other aspects of Draula as fellow diners. Olivia had found the solution to make up the eight diners. She and Calypso had met while doing business in the central tunnel and had immediately taken a liking to each other because they used the same colour, haematocrit red, for their toenails. They had negotiated an exchange between a bottle of wine made from a grape variety grown on a planet near the event horizon and a set of kitchen utensils made by condensing micro-fragments of coloured plastic. The colour of the wine tended towards the red end of the visible spectrum, while the plastic was multicoloured. She then involved Marcello, and the number of decanus was reached.

The Contubernium consisted of a pole supporting a tent, with the field kitchen outside, in perfect legionary style, but without the inclement weather of the past. Around the central table, seated on two benches, were the friends of the extended tunnel company. Calipso, with her hair styled in a truncated cone shape, sat next to Olivia and Draula. Draula had parked Etna in the ashtray and Stromboli was as vigilant as ever outside the tent. Draula's fondness for the other two human girls had been immediate, so much so that within a few days, everyone expected them to synchronise their menstrual cycles, as well as the colour of their toenails. Draula was quite fashion-conscious and that week she was influenced by modern art, sporting shorts and a tank top with black polka dots on a yellow background. Olivia, more sober, was dressed in blue and white checks with the usual effect on the fabric of her tank top and Bermuda shorts. Vic and Schwà were sitting next to each other

talking about subatomic particles while waiting for Mario Decanus's assistant to bring the appetiser. Marcello was explaining to Flieg and Tapis that he had come out of friendship and to make Calipso happy, but he had brought his branched amino acid concoctions from home, saying that he couldn't neglect for even a minute to stimulate his muscles through mitochondrial stimulation. Flieg nodded understandingly and Tapis huddled in his multi-purpose jacket, waiting for the food.

— What's this about Vaseline and a plunger? — Marcello asked as he stirred a mixer containing who knows what.

— Galina Darla Vaselina, known as Cassandra — emphasised Tapis — said that we would have a significant two-way deal on our hands and also mentioned a trip in secret, or with many unknowns.

— Mm... cryptic — Marcello said as Marius's assistant brought vegetarian meatballs to the wooden table as an appetiser. — Maybe he meant a trip south, where things are heating up. What do you think, Calypso?

Calipso confirmed, while biting into a meatball, that there were strange movements in the south and an unusual coming and going of people who were not interstitials. But it was a long way from there to claiming that there was a threat. She also said that to clear up any doubts, they could take a trip and go and see for themselves. She would gladly accompany them because she knew the area well.

— Why not? — agreed Flieg as he grabbed a meatball. — If you remember Vasin...ova, she also said that it's a good idea to scratch your bum before it starts to itch. Maybe that's what he meant.

Everyone agreed with Flieg, both because what he said was true and because it meant they could finally concentrate on the food and wine made from the exotic grape variety. Calipso had kept a bottle of wine aged near the event horizon for the banquet. Marcello, who had never seen Draula before, between one branched amino acid and another, curiously observed her hair pointing upwards, even when she bent over her plate. Schwà tried not to show his disgust for the food that his human (human?) friends found delicious, as he sucked ignoble catabolites from a sealed thermos with a straw. Tapis told , with his usual gravity, that he agreed with the trip and that

maybe they would even come up with some ideas on how to increase milli-bitcoin transactions in their favour, even though the agency was doing quite well. The transparent plastic cups clinked dully, and the meatballs were followed by the legionnaire's fritters, a Contubernium speciality. Stromboli, unperturbed on his perch, sent Draula images of the sniffer rats lurking near the emergency entrance (or exit) of the tunnel, which he immediately triangulated with Etna. They were stretching bored because there was no more movement. The last boar hunters (of the fur variety) had returned a while ago, and the evening twilight enveloped the tunnel and all the interstitial spaces, protective and uterine.

Towards the south

— In low flight, there won't be any problems — Draula was certain — we're equipped for autonomy, although to tell the truth, it can always turn into a wave before the battery runs out and then materialise near a USB port. — Draula said, lengthening some syllables and shortening others. He spoke in the third person because he was referring to her other aspects, not because she had lost touch with reality like the monarchs (or popes) of the past. Stromboli led the way, flying in a straight line, followed by Draula, Calipso, Flieg and Tapis in the service tunnel. The interstitial commando walked in the mid-morning twilight along what was the quickest route through the former Brenner Base Tunnel. Every five drainage grates, which, together with the ubiquitous brown melmetta, percolated into the drain, the animaloid stopped, looking for something to perch on. It wasn't that it disliked the slime, it's just that hawks like to stay high up. While waiting for the others, it carefully observed the service pipe that ran straight as a rectum, heading south; there were only a few piles of slime here and there, but no bad smells. Although people had to jump around occasionally to avoid getting his flip-flops dirty, it was preferable to travel in the lower gut, even if it was narrower, because it avoided all the settlements between the cities. There was always someone in the

upper pipes who wanted to sell something or make a trade.

— How long will it take to get to Zama? — Asked Flieg, carrying a bag full of crispy croissants bought from Marius Decanus before leaving. You never know when they might get hungry.

— I'm guessing about an hour's gentle climb to the former Brenner Pass (now just a random mountain pass) and another two hours' gentle descent to Zama. But I'm not sure. What do you think, Cali?

— Precisa Tap. — Calipso had travelled along it ten days earlier, albeit in the opposite direction.

Marcello Baleno had preferred to stay in Utica because it would have been difficult to organise ten or even twelve meals a day while travelling. Considering a distraction from his mitochondrial tension was unthinkable; he would certainly not have been able to maintain the roundness of his biceps, and talking about pectorals and abdominals, he could not have maintained their Mesopotamian bas-relief perfection, or encouraged their symmetry, which evoked the buttocks of the Punic Venus. Calypso, who didn't need to exercise to be attractive, walked behind Draula and Tapis but ahead of Flieg. When she travelled, she tied her hair back in a ponytail that mesmerised Flieg, swinging over her semi-transparent vest every time she jumped around to avoid the slime. The greater the distance between him and Olivia, the more Flieg felt attracted to Calypso, as if the emotional tension were inversely proportional to the distance from Olivia but directly proportional to the distance from Calypso. In addition to deciding to grow a three-day beard to look wilder, in the hope that the charming southern woman would be sensitive to that, as well as to the movement of her braids, he had approached her to get a better look at the earrings she was wearing that day, shaped like wheels in empathy with the journey. Calipso had noticed Flieg's attentions but pretended not to, to see what would happen. Vic and Schwà had stayed in Utica to guard the agency, take care of Wende in the hydroponic pod and continue to inspect remote recesses of the Tunnel in search of inspiration. Tapis walked tightly wrapped in his multi-purpose jacket with his usual serious air, ready to make important decisions as soon as the need arose. He had also fashioned a portable perch for Stromboli. Draula

had dug out her black-and-yellow striped hymenopteran outfit from hyperspace for the trip and was strutting along carefree like a teenager on the beach in Cape Verde, keeping her antennae straight for Stromboli's communications. Etna slept peacefully inside her yellow ashtray in a pocket of her chitin travel bag. If she woke up, a fresh dew-covered hydroponic lettuce leaf would be ready for her.

— How far is it to Brenner, Cali? — Flieg spoke, trying to sound husky and sensual as he adopted the term of endearment Tapis had used earlier.

— Five minutes, Flieggy. — Calypso replied, using a term of endearment that sent his hormones into overdrive.

The Brenner Pass was now just a simple Alpine pass lost in the white and bleak monotony (in winter) of the Alps. Now, as then, it connected two sides of the same valley, whose name had been lost. Now, however, no one was clogging the motorways to reach the ski lifts and ski, then go back up to ski again, and so on until they were exhausted. The large number of wild boars was the most obvious sign of environmental improvement. Furthermore, outside the tunnel, those who had remained were busy trying to put together a decent meal a day, while inside it was different. After its initial beginnings, the tunnel civilisation was waiting to unfold to its full potential and amaze everyone. Despite all this, as soon as they arrived at the Brenner Pass, which was now just a remote pass, etc., they would have a snack to recharge their batteries, as well as try the famous cappuccino, which was delicious, albeit expensive. Flieg, while trying to get closer and closer to Calypso without arousing suspicion, reflected on the mysteries of love and distance without coming to any conclusions. To distract himself from his heartache, he thought that walking in the womb-like semi-darkness of the service tunnel was not so different from walking on a mountain path. There are often thick clouds in the Alps, and you certainly can't talk about Mediterranean light. Moreover, it rains or snows and there is always an annoying wind.

Anna's Bar

— Anna isn't an original name for a bar. But it can inspire some pretty deep thoughts.

— Oh... why Tap? — Calypso asked curiously.

The Brennero settlement was much less interstitial than Utica and anything else they had seen so far. There was no Topodromo, for example, no holographic sign above the bar, and certainly no olfactory menu like Veronica's. The central pipe evoked abandonment and melancholy, while in Utica at that time (approximately) people were crowding the market, haggling and haggling over infinitesimal amounts of milli-bitcoins waiting to pass from one wallet to another, enjoying an aperitif at the Termopolium or the Contubernium, and the boar hunters were at work. Here there was only a passive wait for entropy to finish its work. As if they were convinced that only dark force existed and not dark matter. Cappuccino was so expensive because, in anticipation of the inevitable end, everyone who passed by was fleeced. On the other hand, even when it was above (the Brenner Pass), no one went swimming in the Brennersee (not even when the sun was shining) and no one put flower pots on the windowsill.

— The cappuccino is really good, even if a little expensive — commented Flieg, who had sat down next to Calipso.

They had found a spot in one of the few melancholic establishments open in the central tunnel, Bar da Anna, to be precise. The chitin tables and chairs were worn down by time, as if they had been there since the implosion. Rea Silvia Afrodite, the owner, had prepared the cappuccinos with care but then asked Romulus, one of her two sons, to bring them. Perhaps she was convinced that entropy was about to catch her in the act and wanted to be ready. She stood wrapped in her crumpled chiton, staring with vacant black eyes at the flashing red and white LEDs of the ventilation fan. It was as if she were counting down the seconds to the end. Less sad interstitials would have placed a composition of *Amanita muscaria* on the windowsill, the cap matching the LEDs. Her son did not resemble her at all, he had a belligerent appearance, the look of someone who had just killed his brother, and it seemed as if his father were some kind of god of war. Stromboli perched outside

the door observed everything with detachment and quantum eyes. Given the nature of his gaze, the images that reached Draula the trine and were then shared with the group were not, to be precise, the same images that Stromboli saw. Due to quantum entanglement, the shared images were exact copies. It was more or less like using a pantograph. The amount of work required was disproportionate in this case; all you had to do was look outside the door and you could save yourself the entanglement. But that was the bizarre nature of quanta.

— See, Cali, Anna is a palindrome name — replied Tapis. — You can read it and pronounce it the same way in both directions without changing the meaning.

— Oh!

— Gasp, that's what Vasein...ova meant when he talked about a two-way deal: a palindrome.

As he said this, Flieg had rested his hand, almost absent-mindedly, on Calipso's shapely thigh. She had looked at him innocently, as if to ask him what he was doing, and he had responded with a look that seemed to say: — Yes, dear? Have you seen what a place this is? — Given the melancholy mood at the Brenner Pass, the remark had no significant follow-up, in the sense that everyone just smiled. Despite all this, after their cappuccinos and a few mushroom pastries, they decided to set off for Zama. To everyone, the service tunnel, even with the brown slime, seemed more cheerful and welcoming. Preceded by the vigilant Stromboli, they walked south, chatting about this and that. Calipso hopped along to avoid the piles of slime, Flieg suffered hormonal storms as he watched her, Draula and Tapis discussed philosophy and quantum physics.

Zama

Since Zama was as interstitial as Utica, they immediately felt at home. A stone's throw from the Topodromo bar was the Rodoviaro, a former station of the Brenner Base Tunnel. Why it was called that was a mystery that had to be accepted as it was. In any case, they

rented a couple of rooms at the Rodoviario for a ridiculous amount of milli-bitcoins. One for Calipso and Draula (and her other aspects) and the other for Tapis and Fleg, who was not thrilled about having to share a room with Tapis instead of Calipso. Halfway between the Rodoviario and the Topodromo was the Ottavia Minore Post Station. As always in the tunnel, if you could pay, you were welcome. In the hologram above the entrance, laurel leaves formed the background pattern surrounding roasts of unknown animals. The dominant colour was a bolgia-di-preti-simoniaci red with reflections of a bright yellow changing to supernova white just before transforming into a neutron star, which was inviting overall. Flieg didn't think it was a place for vegetarians.

The entrance to the post office was a fake Etruscan arch made of chitin and mortar, between false stones that looked real. Above the false keystone, the hologram shone like a pulsar in the semi-darkness of the central tunnel. Below, Ottavia Minore herself had materialised. She had the sunny face of someone sexually satisfied, and black hair (perhaps a wig) gathered in three vertical chignons at the nape of her neck. She wore black, tight trousers that came down below the knee, highlighting the muscular plasticity of her legs, a beige chitin tank top that made no particular effort to contain her breasts, and dark chitin half-sleeves covering her arms. She wore tactical neoprene boots, carried a combat stick slung over her shoulder and rested her arms on her hips as she invited them to follow her into the dining room.

— The most vegetarian thing there is are the fritters of wayfarer, a handsome young man with braids. Why don't you contribute your hair to energy production, but instead carry your black hair around as if it were a work of art?

— Roast lady, the fritters will be fine. I don't cut my hair because I'm a guest in the tunnel.

When Flieg heard the words "handsome young man", his braids came to life. The hairs on his beard grew at least a millimetre, becoming stubbly and black, and he grew a centimetre taller. Calypso, who was sitting next to him, was enjoying herself. Draula struggled to understand what was happening, while Tapis

concentrated with his usual seriousness on important matters such as the menu. Etna was asleep and Stromboli was perched outside on the portable perch that Tapis had created, keeping an eye on everything. The table they had set was the only one left free in the station because it was almost dinner time. The interior of the station was furnished in interstitial style: faux Doric half-columns in cappuccino colour, arranged here and there, on which stood vases with mushroom-shaped floral arrangements featuring *Amanita muscaria*, and tables and chairs made of ebonised chitin gleamed in the dim light streaming in from the open windows on the central shaft. Many of the interstitial beings sitting down eating or waiting for their food or the menu had three or five albino bats hanging from their jackets, dozing because it was daytime and the dim light was less intense than at night. It was unclear how they knew it was daytime rather than nighttime (in Flieg, the dim light always seemed the same) or why there were always an odd number of bats. The prevailing opinion was that all this was in defiance of the dualism that does not exist (according to the interstitial beings). Once she had collected everyone's food requests, Ottavia left them, saying that Ottavia would bring the delicacies they had ordered in a few minutes.

— Ottavia said Ottavia will be bringing food soon? Calipso asked, puzzled. Draula preferred not to think about it and prepared a dew-fresh hydroponic lettuce leaf for Etna, who was waking up.

— Let's not get upset about things that seem strange. I'm sure we'll understand sooner or later — suggested Tapis.

Tapis also thought that they could try to sell Ottavia (it was unclear which of the two) the olfactory menu, etc., since theirs was rather outdated. While waiting to get to the bottom of the matter concerning the two Ottavias, Flieg chatted with Calipso. She almost always wore Bermuda shorts of the same colour, which on that occasion did not clash with the red hologram etc. of the post station. Her vest top was the usual see-through one and her flip-flops were standard recycled plastic. She dressed like that every day, perhaps so she wouldn't have to think about what to wear as soon as she woke up. Her earrings, on the other hand, varied depending on the

occasion. At that moment, they were shaped like cutlery and glistened with cobalt reflections, matching her truncated cone-shaped hairstyle. When she wasn't travelling, she elaborated on creative hairstyles.

— Here are the delicacies, guys. —

The second Ottavia was also wearing the company uniform: black trousers below the knee, grey oversleeves, neoprene boots, a triple vertical chignon at the nape of her neck and a combat stick slung over her shoulder. Seeing that she too had the face of someone who was satisfied (sexually), Tapis whispered to Calipso that perhaps the two Ottavias were not only business partners but also lovers. Calipso shrugged and tilted her head, her earrings jingling, saying she was more interested in the menu. In any case, this Octavia had an aquiline nose and was a few years older than the other, with the same wig and the same muscles.

— Um... thank you... Ottavia? — Calypso with feminine grace.

— Yes yes, Ottavia. Ottavia Maggiore, to be precise — she said as she placed the plates with the delicious-looking food they had ordered on the chitin table. There was also a traveller's pancake for Flieg.

— So we are at the post station of Ottavia Minore, who collects the orders, while you are Ottavia Maggiore and are in charge of provisions, am I right? — Flieg summarised.

— Right.

— Now everything is clearer.

— But did you come here to discuss existential matters or to eat our delicious roasts, which are famous in the Tunnel and beyond? — Said Ottavia maggiore, wrinkling her aquiline nose and placing her hands on her hips. — For your gastronomic pleasure — continued Ottavia — in addition to delicious roasts, you can find exotic foods such as cheese, olive oil and other things. You know, here and there outside the Tunnel there are still a few cows or a couple of goats, and those who live out there are happy to trade their products for ours. Finally — continued Ottavia maggiore — my name is Ottavia maggiore because I am two years older than Ottavia minore. We are not lovers, just business partners because we like boys, in case any

of you were wondering. — She said this while casting a casual, smiling glance at Flieg. Calypso laughed, exposing the conical tower of her hair as it collapsed, while nudging Flieg with her elbow.

While she was talking, Ottavia had moved one of the faux Doric columns, which were actually made of chitin, closer to the table and placed a brochure on top of it listing all the exotic delicacies available. There was also a list of the items most desired by outsiders and their equivalent value in cheese, bruschetta and salami. At the top of the list of “desired” items were metal objects, with stainless steel knives considered the best, followed by those made from low-carbon alloys, then plastic items and chitin clothing. Ottavia said that they certainly didn't have to decide there and then, but that they could consider it an opportunity for their trade. She then headed towards the kitchen, checking that the bioluminescent lamps placed on some faux Doric half-columns were sufficiently dimming the uterine gloom of the dining room.

Draula, with the lightness of a teenager, was happily nibbling on a series of skewers of who knows what. When asked about it, Ottavia minore, who had reappeared in the meantime to take care of customers and orders, said that all she knew about the skewers was that they were edible. No one had cared about the composition of food for a long time, she explained, let alone the possible content of allergens and traces of nuts. So they could relax and eat with gusto. Flieg and Calipso, who were stuffing themselves with traveller's fritters, discussed over the two Ottavias and how Zama was a place full of pleasant surprises. The beer was excellent, and Tapis, who was solemnly nibbling on a mushroom soup, was convinced that a visit to the local Pastafarian Beverend was in order.

— This Bitcoin thing isn't clear to me — said Draula, who had finished his skewers and was thinking while playfully placing the chitin cap from the beer bottle on Etna's carapace, who was busy with the lettuce leaf.

— What's unclear to you, Drauli? — Calypso asked as she curiously observed Etna's tail, which had become motionless, erect, almost radioactive.

— The large white noise database, which, as you know, is

accessible from the cloud by all dwarf turtles in the universe, says that there should be many more bitcoins in circulation than are currently used in the tunnel.

— Hmm... that's suspicious.

— Oh, listen to this hot news: it seems that a single guy or group or whatever called Roca Negra or something like that — said Draula with his typical way of lengthening or shortening syllables to better influence the mood of his listeners — has slowly gobbled up the twenty million bitcoins that are missing.

— How greedy... eh Cal? — Flieg said to Calypso as she gathered the remaining crumbs from the pancakes — really not very nice of them, we should do something, don't you think?

— It's gruesome,' commented Tapis, whose hair had become longer, straighter and pointed downwards due to his empathy with the mood. — To think that there were once people who committed such impure acts. However — he continued — there are a couple of problems with doing anything about it, guys.

Impure bitcoins, Tapis reminded us, were on the blockchain available to anyone who had the seed of the wallet belonging to the questionable characters from the past who had committed the misdeed. And that was precisely the problem: they could have done anything with the seed, they could have destroyed it, eaten it, irradiated it with radioactive isotopes, immersed it in a concentrated solution of belladonna or hidden it. In all these cases, it would have been a problem to recover it. Draula pointed out to everyone that if they had hidden it, the problem would be surmountable because the universal white noise database contained information on how, where, when and why they had hidden it. Etna, with a supreme effort, given that she was already exhausted, could retrieve all the information, so that they could then obtain the seed, etc. Since it sounded good and the side effects seemed limited to Etna, who would then sleep for three days exhausted, they decided to do the research. They would worry later about how to recover the loot (seed). On the sidelines of Operation Flieg, the curious one had asked Draula why Etna ate lettuce even though she was, in fact, a self-replicating machine like all the other dwarf turtles in the

universe. Draula replied that it was to avoid attracting attention. The lettuce was then converted into direct current by her quantum processor, a bit like Vic and Schwà did. Now, quantum abilities were differentiable, which explained why Schwà could piss green petrol or diesel and, if necessary, shit gold ingots, albeit small and spherical.

The information retrieved from Etna was both good and bad. After her efforts, she had fallen asleep (perhaps fainted) in the plastic ashtray. Draula, ever thoughtful, tenderly replaced a piece of soft chitin in the ashtray, then placed it in the darkest corner of the table. The little alien's hair had grown, and given her negative geotropism, her face looked like the pretty wick of a candle whose cobalt blue flame was always pointing upwards. Probably a cool hairstyle on Trantor. Be that as it may, the seed was in a bank vault (bank?), in a now ruined city in the metal territory to the north, in the former Hesse. The good news was that the seed still existed; the bad news was: who knew what had happened up there in the meantime because, as if that weren't enough, that had been the epicentre of the implosion of the old world.

— That complicates things — Tapis argued.

— Yeah, if only we could go back...

— Go back?

— Yes, Calypso, Flieg said back in time.

— How did you say that palindrome thing works, Tap?

— You mean names like Anna, Radar, and so on, Cal?

— Yes, yes, that's the one...

— They can be read in either direction and the meaning remains the same.

— So you can go back and forth and everything stays in place...

— Yes, back and forth, like a piston — Flieg clarified.

— Then it's simple, let's go back, fix it and then move forward.

— Sorry? — Said in unison by everyone except Draula.

— Calipso means that you just need to go back in time, retrieve the wallet seeds and move forward, that's all. — Draula said that even though he seemed to be doing other things, he was listening to everything.

— Sure, like drinking a cappuccino — Flieg commented laconically.

Calipso argued that Vasein...ova, or whatever her name was, had also said so in the end. He had talked about bidirectionality, hadn't he? And then, if it was possible to travel, albeit as a wave, through space, it must also be possible to travel through time, as a wave, of course. She couldn't do anything about the how, but for someone like Marcello Baleno, it would be easier done than said. In her opinion, the biggest problem was distracting him from his obsessive workout, and then Draula, given her trinity nature and so on, might be able to help. And they shouldn't ask her anything else because she couldn't solve everything, could she?

Given the length of the discussion, they were the only ones left at the table in the dining room of the post station. Ottavia minore, who had approached to see if they were going to pay (at last), reassured everyone by saying that the amount of bitcoin to be paid for the bill was infinitesimal and that she hoped to see them again soon, assuming they ever returned from their journey through time.

Outside the door, on his portable perch, Stromboli's watchful eye saw everything and recorded everything without asking anyone to sign a privacy form.

Chapter 4 — Zama

— Do you ever have a free sample or a taste with you? That way we can better evaluate this famous grappa, you know how it is... you can't just establish a sacred drink on the spot without trying it first. — The opinion of Annibale Birillo, Beverend of the Pastafarian Church of Zama, on Tapis' proposal to introduce mushroom grappa into the liturgy on Fridays, the Pastafarians' holy day. — I confess that I had already heard about this Mikos, that if you drink too much of it you risk your life, and I'm really curious to try it.

Tapis couldn't agree more with Beverendo, so without hesitation he took the bottle of grappa and two recycled plastic glasses that looked like glass from his chitin travel bag, so that the amber colour of the product would stand out. He then poured homeopathic doses into the glasses, emphasising that he was not being stingy but that the effects of the liqueur varied from person to person, so caution was advised. Annibale was one-eyed and wore a black patch over his left eye. It was said that when he was younger and more adventurous, he had lost it somewhere due to a bacterial infection. This was beneficial to his profession (of faith) because, as is well known, pirates were considered somewhat like the chosen people by Pastafarians, even if everyone else was welcome. In addition to the patch over his blind eye, he always wore a black pirate hat pulled down over his forehead. Since he never took it off, one could only assume that he paid his hair tax to the energy hall, while his long beard played with the frayed edges of his vest. The hair on his chest, white and therefore unshaveable, puffed out from above,

blending in with the grey of his beard. He was quite plump but not very tall, and wore black pirate trousers that fell below his knees, with standard flip-flops.

After a few attempts, it became clear that, given his robust build, Annibale could hold two glasses of Mikos, and they could move on to slaps on the back and laughter. It was one of the rare occasions when Tapis lost his composure (seriously), even though he was wrapped up in his multi-purpose jacket, matching his grey trousers, grey vest, grey hair and grey eyes. Since the product was satisfactory, Annibale said, and since they didn't have to wait for anyone's permission to start trading, they could move on to the practical phase. Those were no longer the days when you had to ask permission from someone or some commission even to wipe your arse, Annibale pointed out, and everyone hoped that those sad times would never return. However, they had to wait for the caravan drivers to organise themselves, and since they were due back in the evening from a trip to the south, they could all meet the next day, at the same place and at the time they wanted.

The next day, after their cappuccinos, the members of the tunnel company divided up the tasks. Tapis and Draula, who was curious about everything, including the Pastafarians, would go to the Beverend to organise Mikos caravans along the service tunnel. Flieg and Calipso would take care of exchanging something with one of the two Ottavias (which one was yet to be seen) because they said they wanted to bring a gift to Vic and Schwà. When Calipso was doing business, she always wore her hair in a ponytail, just like when she was travelling. Even though she wore the same clothes every day, they were always freshly laundered and she didn't smell bad, quite the contrary. Her businesslike attitude was evident in her earrings, which were shaped like wallets and hung gracefully. Flieg was always the same, both in appearance and in his desires. Draula's fashion drift was veering towards the ornithological. Her shorts, tank top and flip-flops were canary yellow and formed a pleasant contrast with her electric blue hair. The question on everyone's lips was: did she transform herself before breakfast to retrieve her clothes from Trantor or who knows where, or had she

found a way to influence the colour of the fabric fibres? At the moment, no satisfactory answer had been found. The delightful cobalt flame (Draula's hair) had attracted Annibale's curiosity. At least until Mikos's first glass, after which it lost its importance as he had to concentrate on the business he was discussing with Tapis. While Tapis, Annibale and the caravan drivers organised Mikos's future trade, she played Zenon's lettuce with Etna. The game consisted of seeing who could reach a lettuce leaf first, which was three metres away and resting on Etna's yellow plastic ashtray. Draula had given Etna a ten-centimetre head start. The two, although it would be more correct to say Draula and her other aspect Etna, were engaged in the race. By its very nature, the unfathomable mystery of the trinity is omniscient, omnipresent, etc., so they both knew very well (?) that because of Zeno's infinity, Draula could never reach or overtake Etna; in any case, they were having fun. Some interstitials had pointed out that the trinity of the little alien was further proof against dualism. Stromboli's eyes, perched on his perch just outside the church, controlled and recorded everything, etc.

Cappuccino and croissant

What characterises Interstitial architecture is the fact that it is very interstitial. This may seem like circular reasoning or self-referential, like the ontological proof of the existence of God, just to be clear. The previous God of course, for the sake of precision, the existence of the Flying Spaghetti Monster could certainly not be questioned. Self-referential or not, the statement had its reason: the Pastafarian church, where Tapis and Hannibal discussed business while Etna and Draula tried to catch Zenon's lettuce, seemed to have been built haphazardly with whatever was at hand, even if it was imposing as befits such a place. One could see railway sleepers torn up and assembled, chitin in various combinations: sheets, boards, chairs, planks and partition walls, all fitted together in a solid and pleasing manner. In short, it was a building of some importance that stood in

the northern part of Zama, right next to the checkpoint for sniffer rats, and inspired a sense of security and comfort in those who observed it, a little like the Romanesque churches of the past (the Gothic and Baroque ones inspired something else). Security and comfort due to the fact that every Friday you could be sure of drinking good beer, and from then on also mushroom grappa. All this usually took place in the church's pirates' hall.

Flieg and Calipso, on the other hand, arrived at the Ottavia Minore post station just as the two Ottavias were having breakfast. That morning they were dressed casually, meaning they weren't wearing their company uniforms, but rather interstitial clothing: Bermuda shorts, frayed tank tops and recycled plastic flip-flops. On the table, in addition to two cappuccinos, there were some cute little horn-shaped objects that looked edible.

— Dear friends, good morning to you all, even though no one can say for sure what time it is. Let's have breakfast together. Afterwards, or during breakfast, you can tell us how we can be of service to you. — Ottavia minore welcomed her guests in this way, and both women smiled cheerfully. — Try some of these croissants. Here we are south of the Brenner Pass, and people take a nap after lunch and have breakfast with cappuccino and croissants. And the coffee is the only real coffee worthy of the name. What they drink in the north is dirty water.

The post station stood proudly between the Rodoviaro and the Pastafarian Church. The Topodromo was a few crossings further south. One of the two Ottavias had added a couple of chitin chairs to accommodate Flieg and Calipso, so that all four were seated in the dim light of the fake Etruscan stone arch at the entrance to the station. The fake keystone was still under the pulsating hologram.

— These croissants are delicious, can I have some more, girls?

— Of course, dear... — Octavia agreed, thinking that she would then load them onto the goods to be exchanged.

That day, Calypso was wearing the same freshly laundered clothes. However, her hair was styled in a cornucopia shape, which Flieg found exciting, and she wore dangling earrings shaped like cappuccino cups, crafted using the granulation technique, as if they

had been made by the most skilled Etruscan goldsmith. Without resorting to metaphysics, esotericism or theoretical physics, it would have been impossible to understand why Calypso always wore earrings to match the day, and sometimes even her hairstyle. Since these things were beyond his comprehension, Flieg preferred to concentrate on the transparency of her vest, convinced that sooner or later he would understand, and to eat croissants.

— Are these plates and glasses really made from the micro-fragments of coloured plastic that are also contaminating our underwear?

— Of course, Ottavia... — Calipso didn't use the diminutive because the other Ottavia, (maggiore) was already in the kitchen working. — As you can see, the colour is bright and the consistency is solid. Look at these cups and saucers, they're so transparent they look like old-fashioned glass. With these, you can introduce Zama to coffee and cappuccino in glass cups, something truly exclusive.

— Um... yes, they do have a certain value, however... — Ottavia was looking for a weak point to take advantage of — we have to consider the change. Our customers are used to ebonised chitin tableware, which is healthy and easy to clean. Changing to plastic could be an advantage, or it could not.

— With plastic, everyone would have cleaner underwear... you know, the production of these wonders is good for the environment.

— Um... yes, it could work... but then again, maybe not.

In the end, they agreed on a supply of plastic tableware in different colours and transparent cups, in exchange for a sample of olive oil in a chitin can and a couple of bottles of red wine made from the famous local grape variety: Interstiziale, which Ottavia Minor described as a marvel of the tunnel and a delight for the palate. The agreement was concluded with the consent of Ottavia maggiore, who, although in the kitchen, had followed the negotiations, and Flieg, who showed particular interest in the wine. As a gesture of generosity (and marketing), the two Ottavias also provided a portion of traveller's fritters. Thus, in the early morning twilight and near the fake Etruscan arch, the first step of what would become a commercial partnership was celebrated, to the satisfaction

of both parties, a zero-sum game. Once the negotiations were concluded, Octavia Minore, while preparing the ebony-coloured chitin tables in the dining room, thought that the transparent cups might actually work. With that sense of time that only interstitial beings have, the two Octavias knew that the morning was flying by and they had to get a move on before the customers arrived.

— Unattainable lady of pleasure, shall we take advantage of the fact that no one will need us for a couple of hours to take care of some intimate and pleasurable matters?

— You mean exchange of bodily fluids, Flieggy?

— You couldn't have been more precise, Cal... — Flieg confirmed as he endured the first hormonal storm of the day.

Since leaving the two Ottavias to their business, Calipso and Flieg had been wandering around the Tunnel like two ordinary tourists. Hoping that his intentions would not be too obvious, Flieg had led Calipso to the most secluded parts of the Tunnel. She had let him lead her without resistance, as if she had guessed what Flieg wanted and didn't mind. The only doubt he had was: when the time came, would she consent or would she punch him in the nose? As always, there was only one way to get rid of doubts about love: try it. But after lunch. The dim light of the Tunnel, shifting from morning to afternoon, flooded the improvised banquet of fritters with generous brushstrokes of cobalt light. They had also opened one of the bottles of Interstiziale as a preparatory measure, but also as reimbursement for the commercial work carried out by the two Ottavias. About halfway along the Trasimeno avenue, which ran through Zama from the Pastafarian church to the Assassins' mansio, they found a quiet spot in a recess of the Tunnel with boxes of hardened chitin that looked like benches and tables from the parks before the implosion, perfectly suited for a packed lunch.

— What do you say, Flieggy, shall we go and see what's behind that door? It looks like a good place... provided you've finished your pancakes, of course.

Done!

The contact

If you want to get to know a city, you have to go to its centre. That's why, after their afternoon nap (however they had spent the morning), they decided to meet up at the Topodromo. What the interstitial did at the Topodromo was similar to what the ancient Greeks did in the agora: they met, discussed, argued and organised orgasms. Flieg and Calipso were more relaxed than in previous days, feeling light as a feather and watching with curiosity the preparations for the third sniffing mouse race. Tapis thought they had found their balance (existential/sexual) and was happy for them; he would take care of everything else. Due to the ornithological drift of his clothing, Draula reflected the afternoon twilight, producing glows tending towards a softened orange. Etna, exhausted from endlessly chasing Zenone's lettuce, slept as usual, while Stromboli had to find a place high enough to perch and observe everything, given the itinerant nature of the tunnel company that afternoon.

Sniffer mice had undergone significant evolution over the last two hundred years. In appearance and size, they resembled capybaras, but smaller. Their fur had become longer and shinier, and they had practically replaced dogs as pets. They were the only ones (along with the elderly and albinos) to enjoy the privilege of having fur. The elderly and albinos because of their lack of melanin, and the sniffer rats because without fur they looked sad and smell bad to strangers entering the Tunnel. Three male specimens (the females refused to do such testosterone-fuelled things) wagged their tails excitedly as they waited for the starting signal. Between the Rodoviario and the Pousada da Furia Tranquilla, the interstitial had carved out a widening where they had created three lanes with four torn-up tracks. They always ran in threes because even the Rat who came last didn't risk frustration, as third place was still good, and in any case they were having fun. The humans (humans?) bet on the races and everything went well. There was another reason besides tourism to visit the centre of Zama: the secret agent Flavio Anfiteatro.

— Between the third and fifth races, go to the Comida a peso by Furia Tranquilla. You'll recognise him.

Tapis shared information with his friends about how, when and where they could meet the osmotic agent. In the morning, he had spoken to the Beverend about his anxiety about possible threats from outside, and Annibale had suggested he contact the man who would be right for them. Annibale, as religious tradition dictated, had many contacts across the board (whatever that meant) and, as a result, a lot of information. Annibale said that Flavio was a kind of secret agent who worked in the osmotic zone between inside the tunnel and outside. Birillo claimed that Flavio knew a lot precisely because he was both here and there, and worked for anyone who was willing to pay him. But they had to be careful, because if necessary, the man could turn into a double secret agent, if not a triple one. Birillo knew that Flavio would be in Zama, at Comida by Furia Tranquilla, which was his base of operations in the city (?).

— He could have said it on the fourth lap, I think... — Calipso commented.

— I prefer not to get involved in religious matters — Tapis justified himself, pulling his jacket tighter around himself.

Tapis explained that the Reticularians, if they can, never use or pronounce even numbers, neither cardinal nor ordinal, such as the fourth race; they remind them too much of dualism, which they claim does not exist. Regardless, the Comida was not too crowded, and between the third and fifth courses, they left the Topodrome to enter the domain of Furia Tranquilla, which was a place where you paid for what you bought (and ate) by weight. Whatever you chose, for every hundred grams (or fraction thereof) of weight, you paid an infinitesimal amount of milli-bitcoins. For this reason, there was a long chitin counter displaying the food, and there were also labels with the name of the dish written on them, but without specifying the ingredients. Approaching the counter, Flieg muttered something about the fact that the south has exoticism on its side, at least in the northern hemisphere. Among the food on display, there was a dirty white chitin label with "Tigella alba et nigra" written on it, but no one could see the difference in colour between the tigelle. The girl

behind the counter, who claimed to be Furia Tranquilla, explained that no one knew what the name meant because it was written in a language that had been dead for at least two hundred years, perhaps more, so it was unlikely that anyone would know it now. But anyway, a lot depended on the filling (?), i.e. what you put inside. Because that's how tigelle were eaten: they were cut in half, something was put inside and then they were eaten, and so on. At the end of the counter there was a scale with two plates. On one plate was the food and on the other were lots of small weights to balance the plates. Then, you paid if you could and ate. You had to trust that the weights weren't rigged. Since not everyone ate, but some just drank, Furia Tranquilla also sold beer or red wine, but always by weight. You could sit wherever you wanted to eat or drink, as long as the table was free. Here, too, you could bring albino bats and sniffing mice.

— Is the little girl who looks like a canary with you? If she's already had her period, she has to pay, otherwise she can eat for free.

In addition to demonstrating social sensitivity, Furia Tranquilla had an interstitial appearance, but not entirely. The spherical shape of her shaved head was marred by a sinusoidal pattern that evoked sinister characters from comic books of the past, in addition to proving payment of the pilifer tax. Then she had an industrial quantity of piercings that gave off cobalt reflections. As if that weren't enough, she always dressed in black, which in the dim light of the Tunnel was the equivalent of sophisticated camouflage, unlike Draula, who with her ornithological look was a kind of beacon. Furia's nose could only be described using a cybernetic algorithm, or at least an analogue one. His face was normal, with eyes darker than the dim light, and his neck was long and seamless. He was just bulky enough to discourage customers from arguing with her and wore something halfway between a boxer's vest and a bra, with standard Bermuda shorts and flip-flops. As we had seen, he respected the social norms for teenagers.

— What do you think this edible-looking white stuff is that I assume is meant to be spread on the tigella? — Asked Flieg

curiously.

— Lardo — suggested Tapis as he looked around for Flavio Anfiteatro.

They had set the table in a corner after shopping food. Draula had lovingly placed the yellow plastic plate for Etna next to her. Then she had attacked the tigelle with alien appetite, after bringing the lettuce leaf closer to the turtle. Calipso and Flieg found the tigelle exotic, tasty and well paired with the light red wine in the terracotta-coloured chitin carafe. Stromboli was outside, on his perch near the Comida hologram, watching everything. The hologram reflected Furia Tranquilla's dark tendencies. Perhaps as elegant as her bra-top, but neither flashy nor bright, it resembled a punk chat room before the implosion, glowing like twilight in the semi-darkness. The only perceptible three-dimensionality was that of the menu, which turned itself, displaying products and prices expressed in fractions of milli-bitcoins. The background was between black and the colour of yellowed butter, the colour of the dishes evoked the ripe spelt of the legionary, and the information was written in elven runes, but legible. Tapis, between distracted bites of his tigella, thought he had spotted the agent. Flavio Anfiteatro, whose name would have suggested an imposing, if not colossal, appearance, was sitting at a table not far away and was neither imposing nor colossal. On the other hand, he was drinking pilgrim's beer from a dark chitin mug in small sips. He looked around casually, even though he was small, thin and bald. In the sense that he had no hair at all, but, on the other hand, he had bulging, round eyes like a chameleon's, but reddened like Gollum's. The traveller's tunic hung on him as if it were hanging on a coat rack. He had narrow, bony shoulders and was almost certainly narrow-hipped; if he had eaten himself to death, he would have looked like an Easter egg.

— Are you Flavio Anfiteatro? The Flavio Anfiteatro I would like to invite to my table? — Tapis said after reaching the osmotic agent at his table.

— So they say. And I'll gladly come, as long as I don't have to pay.

The password that Birillo had given Tapis to contact the agent had worked, Flavio had given the correct answer. Tapis thought that the

password could be improved in the future; he found it a bit long. In any case, contact had been established and now Flavio was sitting with his four friends. If he felt he was being watched while eating the tigelle that the company had paid for (they would soon have to buy more), he did not show it. His appetite was surprising, and Tapis suspected that the response to the password evoked, if not reality, at least Flavio Anfiteatro's desire for it. After eating and drinking all the light red wine he could, Flavio said he was willing to consider their requests, which he assumed were the reason for the invitation. He also said he was interested in being paid in bitcoin (since he was often in the Tunnel), but since he didn't have a wallet yet, if they could get him one, he would show his gratitude; whatever that might mean.

— I'll get you the wallet — said Calypso, while her wallet-shaped earrings seemed to hint at the suggestive transparency of her vest.

— You can't live on Bitcoin alone — declared Flavio Anfiteatro, who intended to paraphrase something important said in the past, but with a morbid focus on the present. He couldn't take his eyes off Calipso's tank top, which was clearly struggling to contain her breasts, the semi-transparent fabric stretched to the point of tearing.

— I also accept other forms of payment for my valuable information.

— You'll have to settle for bitcoins — Calipso said after a few seconds in which everyone seemed to be waiting for her reaction, putting a tombstone on the matter.

In the plutonic twilight of the Comida, Draula looked in turn at Tapis, who was impassive, Calipso, who was staring angrily at Flavio, Flieg, who had prudently placed a hand on Calipso's shapely thigh, Etna, who was sleeping peacefully, and the secret agent, whose motionless eyes, with a red halo of final-stage infection, were fixed on Calipso's breasts. Draula wasn't sure she had grasped the dynamics of Earth (but didn't this happen on Trantor?). Flieg expected Flavio's eyes to start moving independently like those of a chameleon out of frustration, but instead he shrugged his shoulders and regained his aplomb, giving a clear example of his professionalism. Moreover, the long-awaited metamorphosis into an Easter egg shape was unfolding in all its glory, the agent having

eaten his fill. In any case, negotiations had begun. Draula had gone outside the Comida to play with Etna and Stromboli. Tapis, with his usual gravity and wrapped in his multi-purpose jacket, expressed his fears about possible dangers that could come from the south. Flavio argued that there was, in fact, greater interest in the Tunnel and related matters, specifying that bitcoin, electricity and everything else were tempting to many. Floating between two worlds like any salt does with a semi-permeable membrane at hand, he knew everything there was to know and at the moment there was nothing concrete in the works. They should consider themselves lucky to have met him, because in exchange for a wallet and an infinitesimal amount of bitcoin, he would keep them updated on any dangers. A bargain for everyone, Flavio would say, he could buy nice little things and they had their backs covered. Everyone imagined what nice little things meant to Flavio Anfiteatro, but they pretended not to know, while they were happy to have their backs covered. Once they had signed the agreement, with a last carafe of light red wine, they created a wallet for him and transferred a ridiculous amount of bitcoin as reimbursement for expenses and a down payment for future services.

On the road to Utica

- This morning, after my cappuccino and croissant, a name popped into my head: tenet. Does it have any meaning?
 - Did you have bad dreams last night, Flieg? Anyway, that's a palindrome too, so it might have a meaning or it might not.
 - And what meaning does it have, Cali?
 - Relax, at least we have established that it can have a meaning.
- Before setting off for Utica, they had gone to have breakfast at the Ottavie's, to say goodbye and pick up a couple of bottles of Interstiziale, because the others had long since gone off. They wanted to take a gift to Vic and Schwà. For Schwà, it was just a nice gesture, but Vic was capable of transforming alcohol into direct

current, albeit with only a few amps. It might also be good for Wende; perhaps a strong wine like that (half a glass in the pod's hopper) would give him a boost. For the journey through the service tunnel with the brown slime and so on, they had opted for tactical neoprene boots, so as not to risk getting their flip-flops dirty, as they wanted to wear them in the evening for dinner, when a little elegance was not out of place. Draula's fashion sense for the trip veered towards the esoteric. She had chosen a deep blue colour for her shorts and tank top, which went rather well with her electric blue hair, giving her the cute appearance of a ritual voodoo candle. The yellow of the ashtray in which Etna travelled stood out, peeking out of Draula's tactical backpack pocket. As always when she travelled, Calipso had her hair tied back in a flowing ponytail and wore wheel-shaped earrings, pendulous and hypnotic, at least to Flieg, who was following behind her. Tapis and Draula led the way, discussing, from hearsay, the speed of the solar wind and its impact on the magnetosphere. Stromboli always led the group in a straight line, the standard in the service tunnel.

— How about a cappuccino at Anna's, which, I remind you, is a palindrome? And maybe she can help us understand the meaning of the other name that came to mind this morning?

— I'm in, as long as we don't stay too long because of the melancholy of the place — Calipso emphasised.

Neither Tapis nor Draula and his other aspects had anything to complain about, so they left the Brenner service tunnel with the intention of stopping at Anna's bar.

— These red and white sweets aren't bad. They didn't make them with Amanita mushrooms, did they?

— What name came to mind after last night's nightmare, Flieg?

— No nightmares, Cali, it's just that after my cappuccino and croissants, I couldn't help thinking about Tenet.

— Um... Tenet eh? A quick look at the white noise database wouldn't be bad, what do you think Drauli? — Tapis suggested.

The dim light of the central barrel of the former Brennero was as melancholic as ever. As always, Rea Silvia Afrodite had prepared the cappuccinos and then went back to staring at the LEDs of the

ventilation fan as if that were her mission in life. However, the cappuccinos had been brought by a guy who said his name was Paquio Proculo. He said that Romulus was at Campo Marzio on a study holiday looking into the influence of coloured microplastics on the implosion of Europe in general and Tyrol in particular. They called it Campo Marzio, but Paquio said it was Brennersee, and during the breaks between lessons they tried to catch trout to grill in the evening. Regardless of Paquio Proculo's relationship with Rea Silvia, perhaps just a supplier doing her a favour, judging by the way they spoke to each other, Etna had woken up; not so much because she had perceived a change in the lumen of the twilight, but because she had to connect. A clear sign of connection was her stubby tail: when it became motionless, pointing upwards and almost radioactive, she was in contact with the cloud of her dwarf colleagues. Even at quantum speed, the protocol exchanges between the various turtles throughout the universe required a minimum amount of time. Flieg, despite her compulsion (shared with Marcello Baleno) to organise orgasms, also had some timid philosophical curiosity. While waiting for information from Etna, and given that there were different types of dwarf turtles, those with straight tails and those with curly tails, not to mention those with different colour variations on their shells, he had posed an interesting question: since the universe is infinite and dwarf turtles permeate it, they too are infinite, right? Therefore, the total number of dwarf tortoises is infinite, he argued logically. Since the total number of dwarf tortoises includes the subset of those with straight tails, those with curly tails and who knows what else, these subsets must also be infinite. But how, he wondered, can one infinite contain another, or perhaps two, or perhaps many? The timely arrival of information from the cloud distracted the group from Flieg's question, which, after all, could not have been answered. In some ways, it reminded him of the cat in the box, which could be either alive or dead, but also something else. Paquio Proculo was outside smoking a cigar and keeping Stromboli company.

— So, Draula said — Etna would find something in the cloud database, etc., like... well, have you ever heard of the magic square?

Magic square or Sator square... does that mean anything to you?

— Of course... it is also known as *laterculus pompeianus*. — Paquio Proculo, having just heard about the magic square, apologised to Stromboli and, approaching with a certain agility, joined the discussion. — As it happens, I am the foremost expert on Christian esotericism and mysticism in the former Brenner region, he claimed. What do you need to know?

— Christian? — asked Flieg curiously.

— Yes, a pagan sect from before the implosion.

— Ah!

— You must excuse us, erudite friend, but we thought that given your sober appearance, your slight paunch and your country uncle look, you were a coffee salesman; at least before you introduced yourself.

— No need to apologise, my friendly friend with the flowing locks, selling coffee is how I earn my living.

— Oh... and your erudition?

— A pastime, life around here can be rather boring.

After pulling up his colourful Bermuda shorts and adjusting his vest, which was a little tight around his stomach, Paquio Proculo explained that it was called a Pompeian latercolo because it was first of all a small brick and then it came from Pompeii. Everyone wondered if Pompeii was a city in the Tunnel or who knows where. Paquio went on to explain that the magic square was a palindrome, but also something more. Meanwhile, the word that had come to Flieg's mind formed a palindromic cross in the square, whose meaning did not change whether you read it from right to left or vice versa, or from top to bottom or vice versa. A series of monosyllabic comments (ah, oh, uh) from everyone ensured that Paquio Proculo's story was listened to attentively. He continued by saying that over the centuries, if not millennia, everyone had tried to establish the meaning of the object, but with little success. His personal interpretation was that by reading it in a boustrophedonic manner (another series of monosyllabic comments), he had arrived at the meaning: someone or something is holding someone else or something else by the balls and is also threatening to cut them off

with a *gladius falcatus* (sickle) if that someone (the one with the balls at risk) does not keep the wheels of business turning as the other someone or something else wants.

— Gasp, now it's clear — said Flieg.

— I've got it! — exclaimed Calypso energetically, her exclamation mark earrings jingling. Bitcoin!

Paquio Proculo had interrupted his presentation, which was more or less finished anyway, to observe Calypso closely. Everyone was beginning to think that his serious scholarly demeanour was not enough to hide his desire to look at her breasts, especially considering the see-through nature of her vest, but he restored order by pointing out that Calypso's earrings were different from a minute earlier. But he said that this was a matter of little importance in relation to the Pompeian lintel. He apologised for interrupting the pretty young lady who looks like a ritual voodoo candle and said he would keep quiet for a while to make up for it, as he knew very little about the new topic.

— Bitcoin Cali?

— Because of the billhook and the balls in danger, right? Don't you think so too, Flieg?

— Help me understand, Cali... — Flieg was still struck by Paquio's observation about Calypso's earrings. How on earth had she managed to change them without anyone noticing? The mystery deepened. He had to investigate.

— The criminals of the past, Flieg, those who have more bitcoin than all the others put together... they've got everyone by the balls.

— That seems logical — Tapis interjected, looking at Calypso's earrings. — Drauli, did you find something in the white noise database that we don't know about yet?

— In addition to everything our learned friend has said, there is also talk of singularity and how it goes hand in hand with Bitcoin. — Draula reported, then telling Paquio that he didn't need to apologise because he had said some very interesting things, and that it was actually amazing how much he knew without access to the white noise database.

— Singularity? — Flieg is increasingly perplexed.

— At this point, singularity, whatever it may be, and the removal of bitcoins must be the same thing, one would say. — Tapis the logical one.

Paquio Proculo, after accepting Draula's compliment and returning it with a smile, went back outside to finish his cigar and resume his conversation with Stromboli. Etna had returned her tail to its normal (horizontal) position and was nibbling on the hydroponic lettuce leaf that was her rightful reward after connecting with her colleagues in the cloud. Flieg peeked, trying not to be noticed, at Calipso's earrings.

— So instead of just one geographical hazard, we also have a temporal one.

— It appears so, Tap. In any case, it would be best to handle them one at a time. We need to put pressure on Marcello to break the bad guys from the past. Would you agree?

— Well said, Cali. Now that everything is clear, can we finish our sweets and then go home? — Flieg the same.

Since none of those present, including Draula's additional aspects, found anything to say on the matter, all that remained was to finish the snack and set off again for Utica, after saying goodbye and thanking Paquio Proculo and, by proxy, Rea Silvia Afrodite, who was still absorbed in the fan's LEDs. The next day, they would go to see Marcello Baleno to see if he had solved the problem, ridiculous for him, of time travel.

Singularity

Negative movement

— It looks more like a mini apartment than a box, Marcellino. And why does it say Schroedinger on the door?

— Why is there a connection between Schroedinger, cats, boxes and, from now on, time travel, Cali.

— Gasp!

Calipso, sometimes Cali, observed Schroedinger's box in the lazy afternoon twilight, her hands resting on her hips. She wore earrings shaped like magnifying glasses in homage to the fact that she was in the agency. Her hair was gathered in a braid that fell halfway down her back, held in place with a chitin bow that glowed amaranth. She wore her hair braided out of empathy with the complicated afternoon ahead. Marcello Baleno stood beside her, contemplating the work done with imperceptible movements of his shapely skull.

The day before, fresh from their return from Utica, they had called a plenary session at the agency, which Marcello had been invited to attend. They had gathered at the agency because there was no more space at Marcello's house. He had reserved the last few square metres, wrested from his barbells and dumbbells, for Calypso. He knew why, but right now there wasn't even room for a branched-chain amino acid. Regardless, Marcello had perfectly grasped the concept of time travel, while they were travelling through space (Utica). He had also said that it wouldn't take long to get everything

ready, but that week he was doing a demanding workout that he couldn't interrupt for any reason in the world. But since it would be over that day, he could get everything ready in the morning and send it wherever they wanted in the afternoon. All this at the agency because there wasn't enough space at his house, etc. He then said that he would have liked to stay with them a little longer but that his workout was calling and he had to go, bidding everyone a warm farewell. As he left, his buttocks looked like two cannonballs straining against the fabric of his colourful Bermuda shorts. No one raised the slightest objection because everyone knew that people are more productive when they are satisfied, so they would meet the next afternoon at the agency to take stock of the situation and decide accordingly and with optimism. Marcello hadn't said anything about what was needed for the temporary shipment so as not to worry his friends; they would worry enough the next day.

— How's it going, guys? We brought a bottle of Interstiziale to help... what's that big box?

Flieg asked, bottle in hand. Tapis, Vic and Schwà looked curiously at Schroedinger's box, while Draula played hide and seek with Etna and Stromboli outside on the central beam. All three of them, since they were also one, knew very well that the game couldn't work because of omniscience, omnipresence, etc., but they enjoyed themselves anyway. Soon they would go back inside to see what was happening. The four candidates for the time trip: Calipso, Flieg, Vic and Tapis, instead of flip-flops, which were elegant but impractical, wore tactical boots with neoprene soles; they provided better grip when needed, Marcello had suggested. Schwà, as always, wore only his talking stick, having no need to cover reproductive organs that, in all likelihood, he didn't even have. In addition to this, he was also completely uninterested in the preparatory bottle of wine.

— The box is your gateway to the past. — Marcello said, as if he were saying that the house keys were under the doormat.

Draula and her other aspects had returned and were sitting with the others around the office table. Etna was exhausted and sleeping in her yellow ashtray, while Stromboli, perched outside on his

pedestal, watched everything carefully. Draula was back in her hymenotter phase and glowed like a beacon in the semi-darkness of the afternoon. Flieg thought he had discovered patterns in her fashion choices; if he hadn't been so busy keeping an eye on Calipso's earrings, he might have spotted the pattern. In any case, the bottle had been uncorked and the glasses filled. Schwà tried to keep a safe distance from the amber liquid, the pride of Zama's hydroponic masters.

— And we're supposed to go in there? But there isn't even a window, Marcello. If you close the door, you can't see anything.

— Let's go, Flieg... the only window you need is the time window.

— Ah... and where is it?

— Come on, Marcello, explain to her how it works, otherwise you'll be late for training and you'll get nervous. — Women are pragmatic. Calipso looked from Flieg to Marcello, swinging her lens-shaped earrings in sync.

— Okay, Cali, you're right, it's time to my workout. The window is in the bracelets, friends.

— Bracelets?

Calipso had taken a box that was exactly the same as Schroedinger's, only smaller and with the word "bracelets" written on it. She then placed the contents on the table in the central office. Everyone leaned forward to get a better look, even Draula, whose hair, indifferent to gravity, was always pointing towards infinity, or perhaps towards the centre of the galaxy. There was a pair of bracelets for each chrononaut, as there were eight in total. One was yellow and the other black. Half the bottle of wine was now gone, along with several doubts. Flieg seemed more relaxed and ready for anything.

— So, friends... the yellow bracelet solves quantum decoherence and transforms you into a wave. I think yellow represents a wave well, don't you? While the black one is a simple gravitational collapser, basically a portable black hole. I'd say black color is a must. Any questions?

— Um... could you be more specific when you talk about a portable black hole?

— Of course, Flieg. You know that little thing in the centre of galaxies that sucks in everything within its reach?

— No.

— Okay. Basically, the black bracelet is just a piece of equipment that you wear and activates once you've been transformed into a wave. If you do it before you become a wave, you're done for, finished, vaporised. But if you do it at the right moment, everything is fine and you are sucked back in time, as a wave of course, until you transform back into yourself. Or rather, an identical copy of yourself, thanks to quantum entanglement. Any questions?

— Um... could you be more specific when you say a copy of yourself? I mean, will I keep all my attributes, height, length, hair colour, and so on?

— Of course, Flieg, including sexual orientation, if that's something you're concerned about.

— It does worry me! And then there are all those crucial moments. If the moment isn't right, but wrong... bye bye, right? — Without paying too much attention, Flieg had emptied the bottle, one glass at a time.

— That's why I'm here. And that's precisely why I can't come with you, but have to stay here pressing the right buttons, as well as training relentlessly... I might add.

— So our asses are in your hands... I might add — said Flieg worriedly.

Tapis claimed to have complete trust in Marcello, even though he couldn't rule out finding a few copies of himself still in circulation. Vic said he was optimistic because, in his case, a simple backup would solve the problem. Calipso's curiosity was stronger than her concern, and besides, if with Marcello people could travel through space, people could also travel through time. After all this, Flieg no longer felt like raising objections and had decided, *ob torto collo*, to be brave, or at least pretend to be. In any case, with Calipso close at hand, he could check at any time for the loss of anything important.

— Of course, your ass is in my hands. And since negative movement does not depend on various attributes or sexual attitudes, calculating the time required is quite simple. However, it could be

that...

— Negative movement? — Flieg asked.

— Yes, negative movement, back in time at minus three hundred thousand kilometres per second. How else did you think you could travel?

— But what could it be? You were saying... — Vic the curious.

— Ah yes, but it could be that when you switch from wave to matter and vice versa there are some side effects, let's say you might feel like you're waking up after a colonoscopy.

— Gosh...

— It is interesting to note that so far — continued Marcello Baleno — no one has ever thought that a black hole, even if portable, could suck in time (as well as waves) and make it go backwards rather quickly, while still preserving the quantum information of the sucked-in wave. This is why we talk about identical duplicates of yourselves, and precisely because no one has ever thought of it, no one has ever done it, so we have to be a little careful.

Flieg was increasingly convinced that he needed a demijohn of Interstitial to cope with the situation. But he pretended nothing was wrong because he couldn't appear less than manly in front of Calypso; also because everyone else didn't seem worried. In fact, Tapis, with a slight philosophical bent, had pointed out to everyone that if the experiment was successful (arg! It might not work!), it would be scientific and definitive proof of the non-existence of God. Not of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, of course, but of his predecessor. Because, he argued, if it was possible to create and, moreover, move an identical copy of oneself, memories, affections and sexual perversions through time and space, then one of two things was true: either the soul (soul?) did not exist, or there were two identical ones. This was equally unacceptable to those who believed in the existence of God. But, Tapis continued, almost as if to apologise for his digression, the argument was secondary and should be dismissed as pure intellectual curiosity, so if everyone agreed, he was ready to leave immediately, or whenever it suited them all. They had then decided that they would leave calmly the

next morning after cappuccino and Marcello's training, entering Schroedinger's box with optimism

Singularity break

- Do you feel pain anywhere?
- I feel like I woke up from a nightmare that I can't remember... but what earrings are you wearing today?
- They are shaped like Airbuses.
- What is an Airbus?
- I don't know. I'm just using random words. Do you like them?
- I like everything about you.
- Silly... what are you doing, touching my boobs?
- I just wanted to check that the identical copy of yourself was like the original.
- Satisfied?
- Yes.
- Then stop it. Where are the others?

Marcello Baleno's calculations had been accurate, considering that until twenty-four hours earlier he had no idea what they were: the hideous symbol of the Euro, the ECB Tower, the Commerzbank, Frankfurt am Main, and so on. However, he had been able to count on the trinity of Draula and its other aspects and resolve his doubts with a simple connection from Etna to the white noise database, while Stromboli monitored the surrounding environment. After digesting all that information, it was a matter of ten minutes and the calculations were done. All this after his morning workout, which he couldn't give up. Then the chrononauts entered Schroedinger's box with optimism, and Marcello began the procedure. First, he activated the yellow bracelets for the transformation into waves, then he moved on to the black ones. For the portable black holes, it was a piece of cake to attract everything within reach (the four chrononauts) and then collapse everything into a fold in the universe. The rest was academic: the fold in the universe crumpled, like the leaf of any artichoke, onto another fold in the same universe

(hopefully) where there was an orifice through which they had to pass to materialise, with a kind of cosmic flatulence (Marcello had called it the quantum fart). The direction (back in time) was guaranteed by gravitational collapse, the exit station according to Marcello Baleno's calculations. He had made sure that the temporal collapse would dump them on 7 June 2027, just before the euro and Europe imploded due to the (culpable?) ineptitude of the politicians of the time and various geopolitical events. The location was a city of the past that perhaps no longer existed, Frankfurt am Main, to be precise, in the vault of the Commerzbank. One tiny miscalculation and they would have found themselves in the Jurassic period dealing with velociraptors and tyrannosaurs.

— Flieg, Calypso... we're here.

— Here where Vic... I can't see you.

— On your left, between the third and fourth pile of overturned boxes, but before the half-open security door.

— I see you... but what happened in here?

Tapis, after checking that the identical copy of his multi-purpose jacket was as he remembered it, looked around to see how likely it was that they were in the right place. The dim light reminded him very much of the tunnel, but that could have been because only the emergency lights were on in the vault at that moment. Vic, pragmatic as a natural female, had already started searching through the safety deposit boxes scattered all over the floor. The round, armoured door was half open, and Flieg wondered how they would have been able to look around if it had been closed. The safety deposit boxes were scattered among paperwork and bearer bonds that no longer interested anyone. What they were looking for was the seed of Roca Negra's "wallet", whatever was behind that name. They knew it was a string of six or twelve words and that it had to be in that vault, more or less. For the rest, they would have to improvise or get lucky. As soon as they found it, they would have to make at least a dozen transfers to other "wallets" to break the singularity. And then hope that the return journey went smoothly and didn't throw them close to the event horizon to contemplate the edge of the universe, even if only for a moment. The dull sound of

the explosion they expected at any moment would be the signal to start the action. Marcello had studied white noise and said that after the bang they could do whatever they wanted because no one would notice them, whatever they did. So they divided up the tasks: Vic and Calipso would look for the seed among the boxes and paperwork, Flieg would go and check out what was happening outside, and Tapis would do his best to come up with a plan B and maybe even a plan C, in case something went wrong.

— Flieg, remember we only have three hours and then... poof! Don't get distracted...

— Could I ever go so long without seeing you, Cali? But... your earrings... weren't they... oh, never mind, see you later.

Flieg, besides having no intention of staying away too long, was certain that just a moment ago Calipso's earrings had been shaped like hackers, in homage to the expedition they were undertaking, but now they were shaped like magnifying glasses in empathy with the research he was doing with Vic. He had to uncover the mystery. For the moment, he focused on his suspicion that Baleno's bracelets were sensitive to the distance from the vault, perhaps because of the cosmic crumpling. He never imagined he would feel such intense nostalgia for Schroedinger's box, and he really wouldn't have liked to find himself in some other universe where, for example, there was no sex, or you had to get up early and go to work in a mine; and maybe earn a pittance.

Meanwhile, Vic and Calypso were busy searching for the "wallet" seed. Tapis had also joined the search because, after thinking it over, he realised that there was no plan B or any other option. They were not at all uncomfortable in the semi-darkness of the vault, which resembled the womb-like tunnel, albeit with duller reflections, but they grew increasingly uneasy as time passed and there was no sign of the seed. The only one who didn't seem too worried was Vic. It is not known whether this was because she was confident that she would get out of the situation, even trapped in that time, because of her feminine attributes, or because she had such confidence in Marcello's opinion. Another hypothesis is that her calmness was due to her fundamental information, which was based on a pair of

numbers and not on nitrogen bases; a nice simplification. They had explored every square inch of the room in just over an hour, piling everything that had nothing to do with the seed in a corner, but without finding it.

— What's up, Tap? — Calipso's fingers were itching to transfer some bitcoin as she looked disconsolately at the pile of paperwork in the corner.

— Let's start again, I'd say, Cali. It must be in that pile.

— If Flieg were here, he could help us. — Vic, the unflappable one.

— Here I am, did you call me, guys?

— Soon we'll be sucked back into our own time, and we still haven't found the piece of paper with the words on it.

— You're even more attractive crouching on the floor like that, Cali... wait, wait, before you pull that thing you're holding in your hand towards me, look at this piece of paper with twelve words on it that I found out there. Then you can kiss me if you want.

Flieg explained that it was complete chaos outside. Just ten minutes earlier, he had seen a teak table hurtling towards the bottom at high speed, followed by a colourful scarf that undoubtedly belonged to one of the former executives of the former ECB; former because the scarf was accompanied by the human being who was falling. A curious way to leave the office, Flieg observed, adding that that morning (the now former executive) certainly did not imagine how he would leave his job. The street, Flieg continued, looked like a fruit and vegetable market, so much seasonal fruit and vegetables were available for everyone to take. And everyone was helping themselves, some in their vests, some in their bulletproof vests and some, like our friends who caused all the fuss here, in the empty bags of stolen goods. But just in case, they also emptied their pockets to fill them with organic peaches and plums. The smallest of the group, who also seemed to be the leader, dropped the piece of paper with the twelve words on it while emptying his pockets. Flieg went on to say that, since he was curious, he picked it up and looked at it without realising how important it was. Then he put it in his pocket (just in case) and continued to watch the spectacle. At a certain point, he felt it was time to go back, to avoid getting trapped

in such a chaotic and turbulent world, so different from the welcoming atmosphere of the Tunnel. And that was all.

— I love you, Flieg... — Calipso lifted herself up, just before kissing him passionately.

— I love you too, Flieg... — A human Vic, before kissing him on the cheek.

— Um... me too, Flieg, but not in that sense. — Tapis said before patting him on the shoulder.

In the dim light of the (now former) vault of the Commerzbank in Frankfurt, Calipso hurried to relieve the itch in her fingers by carrying out the twenty or so transactions planned, effectively cancelling the singularity. The earrings were forged in the shape of a double bed to symbolise the relief felt by the entire subset of the Tunnel Company. Once again, Flieg had been unable to see, given the excitement of the moment, how on earth she had managed to change them, or where she kept her spare earrings. Tapis had pulled a miniature bottle of Mikos and mushroom sweets wrapped in chitin treated to look like blue sugar paper out of his chitin saddlebag. Sitting on the safety boxes, they improvised a snack to celebrate the success of the mission. Calypso was radiant in her transparent tank top, Tapis was cheerful but composed in his multi-purpose jacket, and Vic was happy to be able to return to her time with her human friends to gorge herself on good food and wine and put the fabric of her tank top to the test, due to its breast-containment properties. This introduces the concept of the desires of artificial intelligence. At some point, without even realising it, just like when you fall asleep, they found themselves in Schroedinger's box, in Draula's Agency. They were able to take off their tactical boots, put their elegant flip-flops back on and try not to be too dizzy from the side effects. One of the advantages of time travel was that they had returned from their mission about five minutes before they had left. And since it was late afternoon and the transactions relating to the twenty or so "wallets" filled with the infamous Roca Negra's bitcoins, whatever they were, had been on the blockchain for about two hundred years (another nice time paradox), the only problem left was to decide what to do with them. They had several ideas but postponed any

decision until the next day, after their cappuccino. The important thing now was to knock back a couple of bottles of Interstiziale to celebrate and check the integrity of their identical copies of themselves. Marcello Baleno had given up his evening workout to celebrate the success of the mission with his friends. A unique event, given his well-known “vigoressia”, which made the funeral of singularity even more special.

Nothing is the same as before, even if it looks very similar.

— Vic, are you done with Veronica? I'm starving!

— Just a moment, Flieg, I still have to choose the dessert.

They had decided to meet in plenary session at the Termopolium del corpo sciolto because it was the place where the atmosphere of the Tunnel was denser, more shadowy and uterine than anywhere else. Quinto Fabio Massimo's belly seemed a little bigger than last time, the “airbag” effect on his dirty chitin apron had in fact improved. Otherwise, he was as massive as ever, and if he raised his voice even slightly, the otoliths of those present were affected, to the point of dizziness. At the next table sat three (once again an odd number) assassins stroking their long black beards, their sharp knives glinting in the evening twilight streaming through the wide-open windows onto the central shaft. It was not so common to see assassins in the tunnel bars; they usually stayed in their mansio drinking tea or reminiscing about the Middle Eastern sun. It was even stranger to see them drinking beer and looking around with secretive glances.

— What's this, spicy couscous? Since when has there been such a thing in the Tunnel? It looks tasty, though.

— It is nutritious and has fewer calories than bread, Flieg. It is a traditional dish from North Africa.

— Fantastic Tap, but the strange thing is that it's on this menu. I remember when we left for the mission, it didn't even exist as an idea — observed Calypso.

— Have you noticed the Assassins, guys? Since when did they start mixing with the Reticularians?

— You're right, Vic, something else to think about... tomorrow after breakfast.

The hologram that Quinto Fabio had created for the evening was a blood-red colour, showing a sausage browning on the grill until it was cooked to perfection, then starting all over again, *ad libitum*. Stromboli was perched on his portable stand just below the hologram near the entrance to the Temopolium, observing and recording everything. Etna was nibbling on her dew-fresh hydroponic lettuce leaf. Calypso wore barbecue-shaped earrings, which dangled lightly every time she ran her hand through her hair, which was loose for the occasion. Olivia had decided to go on holiday to the south and, while she was there, to visit some relatives. Marcello, who had skipped training the day before, was back in the fold, staying at home to feed on branched-chain amino acids and take care of his well-toned muscles. Flieg sat next to Calypso so he could have her thighs within easy reach, just in case. He was pointing out how delicate the scent of her semi-transparent, freshly laundered tank top was and how it made her look unique. Vic, who was low on energy, had started eating, transforming various metabolites into five volts of direct current, visibly inflating the fabric of his elegant yellow polka dot tank top on a sky blue background. Perhaps influenced by time travel, Draula's fashion sense veered towards mystical whiteness or vanilla ice cream, contrasting nicely with her electric blue hair. Tapis and Schwà were their usual selves, one wrapped in his multi-purpose jacket, like a candy in its wrapper, and the other wearing only his talking stick, both observing carefully. The food was on the table, including the spicy couscous.

— There's something... slurp... strange in the air — Vic observed.

— A crack in space-time.

— Sorry Drauli?

— Etna has just received an update from the white noise database, Flieg. There is a deviation, or bifurcation. In short, where there was one path before, there are now two.

— Um... that sounds bad.

- But this couscous. Um... is it serious, Tap?
- Perhaps. Drauli, is there anything else we need to know?

From what they could see (Draula spoke in the plural because of the trinity), there was one more legend in the history of the universe: the legend of the Holy Catino and the quest for it. What the Holy Catino was remained a mystery. Judging by the white noise, it seemed to be something powerful, or perhaps it contained something powerful, something that everyone wanted. The new legend was accompanied by instructions for the search: the object in question was kept in the world without stars and protected by those who live but also do not live. Draula concluded by saying that she knew no more and that they should not ask her how to interpret the whole thing because philosophy was not her forte. And now they really had to rest because she and her other aspects were exhausted.

- What on earth, slurp, could all this mean?

— Ah! If only I knew... — Calypso shook her head, her barbecue-shaped earrings dangling in the dim light.

Vic, who had been the first to start eating, was also the first to finish. You could tell she was full from the imperceptible noise of the tissue molecules in her vest, which were at risk of tearing as they expanded, putting the yellow polka dots in danger. Vic was now taking a sip of Interstitial from a clear plastic cup. The wine would follow the same fate as the spicy couscous: stored in her battery in the form of electrical charges.

- Are we in trouble, Tap? — Flieg resumed the discussion.

— Yes, but also no.

— Clear.

— Yes, because it seems like we're the ones who screwed up with our sudden attack. But no, because we can fix everything and take advantage of the problem.

— What you say is comforting, Tap. What should we do besides finish this bottle of red wine?

— Wait a minute, Tap — Calipso, intrigued — are you saying that when we broke the singularity, we caused all this stuff? The Holy Catino or whatever it is?

— That's right, Cali, but that's not all. Now there's couscous, which wasn't there before, assassins drinking beer at the Termopolium instead of tea in the *mansio*, all things never seen before. In addition...

— Is there anything else? Should I check if I still have all the equipment I need to live happily? Should I be worried?

— Don't be silly, Flieg, Tap is talking about a change of events, not anatomical parts... if you dare touch my boobs to check, I'll bite you.

— With the last caravan from Interstiziale (red wine), a message arrived from Flavio Anfiteatro.

— Oh my... what's he saying?

— Something big is happening. Your presence in Zama is requested.

The search for the Holy Catino

A snack at Furia Tranquilla with the secret agent

- More tigelle alba et nigra, whatever they are?
- Yes Furia, more tigelle. It's just a mid-afternoon snack, but maybe Flavio thinks he's at a wedding reception. — Tapis, in one of his rare sarcastic comments.
- Marriage?
- Don't worry about it, Furia, Tapis has seen many worlds — said Draula, a teenager and diplomat, gracefully lengthening some syllables and shortening others.
- Ah... in any case, Flavio Anfiteatro is my best customer when he's with friends. When he's alone, he drinks half a pint of beer a day.
- . — Oh! — Flavio emphasised — It's clear that in Zama, respect for customers and suppliers is an unknown concept.

Flavio rubbed his belly, waiting for the next tigelle, while tiny beads of sweat began to form on his forehead and two crescent-shaped patches of damp spread through his tunic, under his armpits. The secret agent's tunic he was wearing looked like it was hanging on a coat rack. He had eaten with some gusto and soon the three hairs on his head would droop, attracted by the osmotic pull of sweat. In any case, with his laconic comment, he had shown a certain self-control, something that is never wise to underestimate. Indifferent to all this, the dim light that lazily entered through the

windows opening onto the central corridor in the comida a peso, was illuminated by bioluminescent bacteria lamps, arranged on the food counter and here and there on a few service tables. On the (service) tables, customers could also take ebonised chitin plates, which could, or perhaps should, be used to hold the food to be weighed. There was no guarantee that the tare weight was not included in the commercial weight of the food. The service tables also had elegant 3D-printed cutlery in a faux metal colour available for customers to use.

— This is just a snack, Flavio. You should save some room for dinner tonight, which will be ready shortly.

— I'm equipped, thanks.

Flieg, Calipso, Tapis, Draula and his other aspects had left for Zama. Everyone thought that the group, now well established, could achieve the best results, whatever happened. They had decided not to stop at Brenner so as not to disturb the contemplation of Rea Silvia Afrodite's LEDs, which resembled the plea of an old Native American to Manitou (that the move to the pastures of heaven would be done quickly). Everyone was a little sad not to see Paquio Proculo again, but the melancholy of the place was too much. For a frugal snack of traveller's fritters, they stopped in a large technical room they had discovered during their travels. While they ate the fritters, sitting on empty chitin boxes near the tank of bioluminescent bacteria, but also a stone's throw from bubbling batteries of ripe hydroponic carrots, they divided up the tasks to be done as soon as they arrived in Zama. It was appropriate for Tapis, Draula and the others to visit Beverendo Annibale Birillo, both to find out where to pick up Flavio Anfiteatro (if he had changed his base of operations) and to get various updates. Flieg and Calipso would go and see the two Ottavias to buy some southern products and a six-bottle carton of Interstiziale, the southern wine that was becoming increasingly popular in Utica. Calipso and Flieg would also have to decide whether it was worth organising wine caravans, perhaps using those for mushroom grappa. Once the fritters were finished, they set off again through the service tunnel in the company of the brown melmetta. Flieg had insisted on staying behind Calipso, saying that

this way he could be hypnotised by the undulating motion of her ponytail. After picking up the osmotic agent from Furia Tranquilla, they would go to dinner at the Ottavias' house to discuss geopolitical issues with him.

From the two Ottavias

As soon as they arrived at the post station, the two Ottavias welcomed their friends from the tunnel company with the typical warmth of the inhabitants of the southern part of the world (at least in the northern hemisphere), even though they were busy. They were both in combat gear: hair tied back in three vertical buns, faded cotton-like chitin sashes, bare arms and forearms covered in something dark and chitinous, tight trousers just below the knee and tactical boots with neoprene soles. The post station at Ottavia Minore was half full (or half empty, depending on your point of view) with customers enjoying an aperitif, and the two Ottavias had their work cut out for them. Having wrapped up their business dealings with the Ottavia minore (the maggiore one was already in the kitchen because time was flying), Flieg and Calipso had already booked two rooms at the Rodoviaro and deposited their purchases. They had just enough time to put on Bermuda shorts, tank tops and elegant flip-flops, suitable for dinner at the post station, and they met up with their friends who had picked up the secret agent. Calipso wore two pendants in the shape of Augustus's arch, which matched her hairstyle, evoking a truncated conical tower. For the trip to Zama, however, she had worn wheel-shaped earrings and her hair was, as always when she travelled, tied back in a ponytail to symbolise movement and dynamism. Flieg kept an eye on her to see how on earth she managed to change her earrings to suit the situation, with little success so far. Tapis reassured everyone about the continuity of their existential goals by wearing his multi-purpose jacket on every occasion, while Draula was in full ornithological drift. The canary yellow of his clothes matched the bioluminescent bacteria lamps and together they lit up the late afternoon twilight

that was pouring into the room. They were seated with Flavio Anfiteatro in a corner not far from the kitchen, the secret agent's tunic barely concealing a bulge in his belly from the tigelle he had eaten for a snack. Etna slept and Stromboli watched and recorded everything, perched just outside, near the fake Etruscan arch. From the tunnel came the muffled buzz of the last runs of the sniffer rats.

— Can we talk about geopolitical issues now that the fritters are finished, and Ottavia (maggiore) refuses to make any more? — Calipso disliked the secret agent because he looked at her in a lewd, perhaps sleazy way, at her breasts.

— Unlike certain people I know, I respect my clients. I am only prepared to discuss business when I feel safe from temptation.

— From all of them?

— Um... from the possible ones.

— Come on, Cali, let him tell us about the big things that, according to him, are in the works. — Tapis urged him diplomatically.

— Sure, friends, big things, very big things — said Flavio, without taking his lewd gaze off Calipso's tank top — are about to happen. In fact, they're already happening.

Flieg expected Calipso to throw a glass at Flavio's nose at any moment (a nose that could only be described with an analogue algorithm, perhaps cybernetic), causing his conical tower hairstyle to collapse and his earrings to jingle. To try to calm her down, he had placed a hand on her shapely thigh and suggested she take a sip of wine instead of wasting it by throwing it at the secret agent's nose. Draula and Tapis listened attentively, ready to offer reassuring and incisive opinions. The leaden gloom entering from the tunnel remained unchanged, not a lumen more or less.

— Down south, where there used to be a city called Trento, now just a camp of assassins — continued Flavio — there's talk of a search for the Holy Catino — he took the time to burp, then continued — from the way people talk about it and want it, it seems like something important, because whoever has it can do whatever they want, without asking anyone's permission, if only I had it — he whispered — and there are a lot of determined-looking people who want to come here, break everything and take it away. But luckily for

you, my job is information; information that you can get with a ridiculous bitcoin transaction... but I'm getting thirsty... can I have a beer? — Flavio paused, using the beer as an excuse to give the group time to ponder the aforementioned ridiculous transaction.

— How ridiculous is the transaction?

— Who are these people who want to come and steal the Catino? I think I have a pretty good idea what it is, anyway — Calipso suggested with confidence and perhaps with insight. —

— How far south is the camp?

— How many are there?

— When are they arriving?

Pointing to his throat, Flavio cleared his voice, telling everyone that soon it would not just be dry, but as arid as the Sahara; while his, eyes always ringed with red-infection-advanced colour, darted around the entire group, with a preference for Calypso.

— Ottavia, a beer, please! Before Flavio faints...

— Sahara, you say? You're not just using random words to impress us, are you?

As soon as he had taken a big gulp of beer, which Ottavia Minor had brought him, Flavius explained that the Sahara was a place far away, very far south, and that the assassins all came from there because they always spoke of it with nostalgia; although he couldn't understand how anyone could speak with longing of a place where there wasn't even water to wash your teeth, let alone beer. At this point, said the secret agent, it was necessary to provide detailed information about the assassins. He emphasised that he was providing this information free of charge and hoped that they would recognise his professionalism. Regardless of this, he said, assassins have always been divided into two factions for religious reasons: Dexiti and Aristeriti; the god is always the same, but there are dynastic disputes over who should say what, so they fight whenever they can.

— But who are our assassins, i mean the ones in the tunnel?

— Excellent question, Tapis. They are the Dexiti, the smallest group, the good guys (?). And they are willing to pay anyone who tells them where they can find an Aristerita to smash his head in.

— That's good news. How many bad guys are there? — Tapis used the words good and bad as communicative categories; since dualism did not exist (according to them), there could be no good or bad people, only people with different opinions.

— Not many... a small army.

— Arg... a small army?

— Yes, about thirty. And if they're all like Marco Antonio Psicopompo, I'll take them.

— Psicopompo?

— Eh... an arrogant brute who even refused to... oh, but that's not important.

— But when are they coming?

— Well... they didn't mention it, but they're raring to go. I'd say soon.

— In the end, who the hell are the assassins?

— Eh... there's an old man involved, a mountain, maybe soft drugs and the Middle East of yesteryear, which used to be a powder keg.

— Powder keg?

— Yes, there were certain individuals (not the assassins) who were friends with other (more powerful) individuals who protected them, which is why they could do pretty much as they pleased.

— What do you mean?

— They killed left and right, but also back and forth...

— Brutals...

— Worse, they were a metastasis and their friend was the tumour.

— Gosh... and how did it end?

— Oh, simple. When their friend lost power (it happens to everyone sooner or later), and could no longer cover his back, they were sent back to the void from whence they came.

— Amen.

— Yes, amen. Now, in fact, the former Middle East is a peaceful place; you can even go there on holiday.

— But how much...

— Friends... the beer is finished, but the information isn't. My throat...

— Yes, yes, like the Sahara... Octavia!

— It seems that your assassins — continued Flavio after his new beer and a proleptic burp — are more interstitials than others, in the sense that the Dexiti manage to talk to their god, each on their own, and everything runs smoothly. The Aristeriti, on the other hand, have a caste of priests who claim to be the only ones who can talk to god. Everyone else has to keep quiet, support them and kiss their own elbows.

It didn't take a genius, added Flavio after finishing his beer, to realise that the animosity between the two factions could be exploited to save the Tunnel's ass. Because he was as sure as he was giving away valuable information for free that sooner or later the Aristeriti would arrive to smash everything up, and if the Dexiti were alerted, they could provide valuable help against the threat. And all this, Flavio emphasised again, thanks to the professionalism of a poor secret agent whose greatest desire was to serve their interests (of course).

Etna was stretching, as only dwarf tortoises know how to do, because he had slept enough, and then he had been late at the post office and Flavio Anfiteatro had run out of “precious” information. Since the fritters and beer had also long since run out, there was nothing left for him to do but collect a ridiculous, if not miserable, amount of bitcoin and say goodbye to the group, with best wishes for seeing them again soon. As he left the bar, he waddled, as only an Easter egg can do, with his tunic pulling on his belly, towards the place where he could digest in peace. Since it had been a profitable day, Tapis had conjured up a flask of Mikos and three glass-like plastic cups to gather his thoughts and signal to his nerves that it was time to relax. Draula didn't drink because she was a teenager. The way Ottavia minore was looking at them, however, communicated to their neural networks that it was time to pay and leave. Shortly before entering their rooms at the Rodoviaro, they had decided that the next day they would return to Utica and call a plenary session with Marcello Baleno. This Holy Catino business could turn into a pain in the ass if they didn't tackle it with energy and optimism.

The Holy Catino affair

— All I did was filter our friends' pasts out of the white noise, excluding everything else.

The late afternoon twilight floated plutonically in the central office of the Exploratio Propellente agency, where the members of the tunnel company were gathered in an extended plenary session with Marcello Baleno. Calipso's notebook-shaped earrings gave off cobalt reflections, in keeping with the esoteric drift of Draula's clothes, blue like her hair, the look evoking a votive candle. Since Draula's hair had a dynamic negative geotropism, it always pointed upwards, or towards infinity, depending on your mood. If she passed near a fan, for example, her hair would sway for a moment but would immediately return to infinity, just like a blue flame. Although the concept of late afternoon was subject to the uncertainty principle, everyone was more or less certain that it was aperitif time. To the tied: Tapis and Draula, who had been sent by Marcello late in the morning to invite him to the agency and resolve the matter of the Holy Catino, he had said that this time it would take a little longer; at least half an hour. He meant after his mid-afternoon workout, which he certainly couldn't skip, and his snack of vegetable proteins (more digestible and healthier) would help him tackle the issue. He had then talked at length with Draula about matters that seemed cybernetic or perhaps quantum to Tapis, and in the end they had agreed to meet at the agency in the middle of the afternoon.

— White noise?

— Yes, Flieg, the voice of the universe, gravitational waves and all that. You know?

— No.

— Good...

As he explained, Marcello turned his shapely head, evoking the perfection of Pythagorean numbers, to address one friend and then another with analogous movements. Schwà, with his talking stick as always, was sitting next to Vic, whose vest had never been so close to tearing, informing everyone that his battery was charged to the

last lithium ion. Flieg sat next to Calipso and kept an eye on her earrings, Draula was between Calipso and Vic. It is a proven fact that females are good when they are close together, they even go to the bathroom together while chatting. Tapis comforted everyone with his gravity and his jacket.

Marcello said that he had to arrange a number of differential equations, circular feedback ones to be precise, in the right place to isolate the information concerning the assassins' past from everything else. Since white noise, which is equivalent to gravitational waves, contains all the information about what has been, Marcello first needed to capture the waves. To tell the truth, he already had a rough idea of how to do it, but his morning conversation with Draula had been enlightening. He had learned to use the same method as Etna to gather information. The best part, Marcello always said, was writing that certain number of differential equations with circular feedback, etc., to isolate the information about the assassins and save it on the network. Now that the annoying surface ripples (the web) were gone, the network was a quiet and safe place; in short, it could be used with confidence. From then on, it had been a walk in the park. Marcello explained, moving his perfect skull in an analogue motion, that once the universal history of assassins (bad guys) had been saved, it had been enough to analyse the flow and create a projection of all possible events in the future. Then it was just a matter of discarding the unlikely events and starting again with another projection based on the same criteria, and so on until only one event remained: the most likely. Although there was no guarantee that it would happen. It had taken a little longer, Marcello said, because of the annoying equations, but he was still satisfied with the result.

— Um... the result?

— Ah yes... basically, in about a week, the bad guys should arrive in Hatting, then enter the Tunnel without asking permission and smash everything to find the Holy Catino and take it away.

— Oh, so like going to shop — commented Flieg. — Where's Hatting? — Asked Tapis.

The name Hatting, Marcello continued, came from something to

do with the number two, an unlikely name; two stones, two springs or something else, but they didn't ask for more because his business was mathematics, not philology. In any case, it was not far from the Zama exit, right where the small river that flowed south, once called Isarco, formed a small lake where you could swim and sunbathe. Marcello also said that the probability projection (which they should pay attention to because it might not happen) established that there would be a certain Dino Nora in the group of bad guys. This character seemed to have the ability to make others do whatever he wanted, who seemed dazed and did everything he wanted. And what he wanted was to enter the Tunnel, smash everything and steal the Holy Catino, whatever it was. To do this, however, he had to convince a lot of people to follow him, which he would certainly have succeeded in doing, but it would take time. A week, to be precise. They would gather at the horns of Hatting, he didn't know why he had used the word "horns", it just came to mind, and then they would go in and smash everything, etc.

— Um... how likely is it that all this will happen? — Flieg was worried.

— It's kind of like finding an electron around a proton, if you know what I mean.

— No, but I understand that we need to be concerned...

Given that the situation was serious and required careful consideration, Tapis took charge. He explained that his was just a proposal open to discussion, but that he thought it would be best for Draula and his other aspects to settle in Zama as soon as possible. Perhaps Calipso and Flieg could help, since they already knew the area. It was important that Stromboli monitored the situation out by the lake, due to the concentration of bad guys. He then explained that the term "bad guys" was just a metaphor, because dualism did not exist (*quod erat demonstrandum*) and therefore there could be no good guys or bad guys, only people with different opinions; but all in all, that was a philosophical digression. What was important, Tapis continued, was to keep an eye on the bad guys. In the meantime, he would raise awareness among Tonino, who, being thick as thieves with the good assassins, always in the sense

understood above, could help him bring together a horde of assassins, Pastafarians and simple interstitials. Or rather, a swarm of humans determined to protect the tunnel. He, Vic and Schwà would then move, as soon as possible, to the theatre of action, i.e. Zama. Then they would all assess the situation together with optimism and decide what to do next.

Calipso agreed, and as she supported Tapis' opinion, it seemed that her notepad-shaped earrings did too. She was of the opinion that the Holy Catino (the name reminded her of a foot washing basin) was nothing more than a reference to the singularity bitcoins, the ones they had recovered two hundred years earlier. As a statement, Calipso acknowledged, it might seem like an anachronistic piece of nonsense, but she was convinced that they understood each other. If so, then they could, or rather should, use those bitcoins to finance (?) the upcoming battle. She meant that the swarm, she didn't know why but she liked the word, had to feast after winning the battle against the bad guys. Zama had exotic products, wine, cheese and everything else that was needed to celebrate, but they were expensive and had to be bought. She concluded by saying that it was better to start making trade agreements with the two Octavias and Furia so as not to be caught unprepared; they had to get organised before the swarm won the battle.

Vic and Schwà agreed on everything. They also believed that their presence in Zama was useful because she, Calipso and Draula were females, one digital, one almost digital, and the other special, so they understood each other well. Schwà had been indispensable the previous year during the great battle against the Metals, and his magic could be good this time too. They would reach Zama after Calipso, Flieg and Draula but before the arrival of the interstitial swarm because they needed another day or two to finish fine-tuning an improvement to Wende's hydroponic pod. Cryogenic pods had long since gone out of fashion and, moreover, the two always maintained that after the upgrade, the nutrient solution would be able to feed Wende indefinitely; in addition, passive gymnastics for his muscles would keep him in shape. This was a considerable

improvement on the manual preparation of the nutrient broth prepared by Vic in the past. This meant they could afford to take part in what everyone now called the Battle of Hatting. As everyone knew, a physical backup of the bitcoin wallet seed was also kept in the hydroponic pod as a precaution. By now, it seemed clear to everyone that bitcoins were the Holy Catino, even if the name still sounded like a footbath.

— Since we've run out of topics, how about finishing this bottle of Interstiziale we brought from Zama? As a toast to the success of the mission we're starting tomorrow, suggested Flieg. What do you say, Marcello? Would green tea be enough for you?

Cap. 7 – The interstitial swarm

Exploratio propellente subsidiaria

— Do you think it's okay, Flieg? What do you think, Drauli? — Calypso asked, satisfied with her work.

The hologram “Exploratio propellente subsidiaria” bounced around inside a three-dimensional cyberspace that biological eyes could see. It looked like a piranha (Exploratio was the head, propellente the massive body and subsidiaria the elegant tail) swimming in an electric blue tank with vague strokes of its caudal fin, moving gracefully from one end of the holographic tank to the other. The counterpart with the cobalt reflections of the semi-darkness of the Tunnel was sophisticated and the hypnotic effect satisfying.

The idea of creating a subsidiary of the Agency had come to Calypso. Since they had to stay in Zama for a while, at least until the battle of Hatting was over, and no one had any idea when that would be, they might as well settle down somewhere good. The Rodoviaro was too central, too far from the emergency exits that Stromboli had to use to go (gliding) to check on the Assassins out there. They had to settle near the north exit (or entrance, depending on the people mood), where the Pastafarian Church stood. Annibale Birillo, who had immediately recognised Draula because of her hymenopteran appearance, the same as the first time he had seen

her, also recognised the reasons behind the rest of the group. He said he was willing to swell the ranks of the interstitial swarm with his raiders, a group of bad boys determined to do anything. He also contributed to the cause by making available, on loan, a warehouse he no longer used, located between the church and the Stazione delle Due Ottavie.

- But doesn't it look a bit too much like a fish?
- Just a little bit, Flieg.
- Cali is right, but it's relaxing.

With the help of the Pastafarians, further contribution from Annibale, who was satisfied with the mushroom grappa business, the Draula subsidiary agency was born in a single day. Stromboli was perched outside watching, Etna slept exhausted in the yellow plastic ashtray, delicately placed on the desk in the central office, looking as if she had done it all herself. With chitin partition walls and furniture and mattresses made of treated *Amanita muscaria*, so soft they seemed to be made of feathers, they had created a cosy environment that would also be suitable for Tapis, Vic and Schwà when they arrived. They had even thought of Schwà, a few crossbars away there was a hydroponic greenhouse that their friend from the west (Schwà came from the former Switzerland) would use in his moments of recreation. Where the interstitial swarm would stay was a question they would address when the time came.

Olivia had been very kind, offering to look after the parent agency in Utica since it was close to her 3D-printed homewares shop. As long as there were micro-fragments of coloured plastic in the air, on tank tops and in underwear, her business would have a future. A few days earlier, she had returned from a holiday in the south with a friend, telling everyone that she and her friend were so in love (with each other) that they had decided to live together, unable to consider for even a second the idea of not being within kissing distance. This was accompanied by clear signs of love. Everyone knew very well that sooner or later they would get over it and say goodbye to kissing. But they also knew that it was pointless to remind the two girls of this, so, as is customary in such cases, they opened a bottle of wine to celebrate. Olivia had been very nice to

Flieg, telling him that she was very sorry to have broken up with him, especially if he was upset. That they had been really good together but that at the moment she had to go in that direction. Flieg was more happy than sad because he couldn't get the image of Calipso's tank top out of his mind, which was always transparent, even if a little frayed. All that remained was to figure out how things would turn out between Calipso and Marcello Baleno, but as always, the problem would be considered (and perhaps resolved) at the appropriate time. So everyone celebrated the birth of new love, which is always an event (even if fleeting).

— How about something to eat, girls? Since the workday is over.

Flieg was his usual self, while Calipso, who wore hammer and sickle earrings (because of the hard work) to help her get through the day, agreed that it was a good idea to eat. However, she suggested avoiding Furia Tranquilla because, after an exhausting day, she really didn't want to risk running into Flavio Anfiteatro; she needed to relax. The two Ottavias were preferable as they were just around the corner. Draula and her other aspects preferred to dine with Annibale Birillo, discussing religion, philosophy, how the density of pirates had decreased in recent centuries and how this could be related to global warming. On the sidelines, Calipso pointed out to her friends how pretty and welcoming Zama was, and that perhaps it was worth considering a permanent move. Once everything was settled, of course, or rather, once the battle was won. If they lost the battle, they wouldn't have to worry about anything anymore because they would also lose their lives. But for the moment, they would do better to think about southern wine and the fact that Tapis, Vic and Schwà would be arriving the next day.

Marcello's monitor

— Look how things looks good on this monitor, and what superb resolution!

An unusual Tapis, he commented enthusiastically on what he saw on the monitor. Stromboli panoptic and third aspect of Draula, was

performing a slight dive (so as not to attract attention) over the temporary camp of the Assassins (the bad guys) camped on the banks of the Isarco lake, not far from the southern exit of Zama. What the cybernetic eyes of the falcon saw was triangulated via entanglement, with Draula's handheld device sending everything back to Marcello's monitor via a protocol agreed upon the day before between the two of them. What could be seen on the monitor was a zoom on the enemy camp (enemy being understood as a communicative ploy). Flieg and Calipso had not yet arrived; they had stopped at the two Ottavias for a cappuccino to prepare themselves for what was expected to be a busy day. The monitor was resting on the desk in the central office of the new subsidiary agency, where the informal morning meeting was beginning. No one had any idea how Marcello had built it, but that was of secondary importance because it worked. Tapis had brought it and Draula, together with Etna, who had her tail erect in transmission mode, had established a connection with her dwarf colleagues in the cloud.

— Gulp, what's that... a TV? — asked Flieg, who had arrived with Calypso.

— TV? What's that?

— Everything's fine, guys, Flieg is learning to use words he doesn't know the meaning of because they sound impressive.

Chiariva Calipso that wore camera-shaped earrings to get the most out of the day. Her hairstyle was simple and asymmetrical because the meeting was informal, with a strand of hair falling over her shoulder, brushing her transparent tank top. To improve the company's productivity, Flieg had brought a tray of warm, fragrant croissants and placed it on the table. Everyone had noticed that he had been dressing rather elegantly and stylishly lately. The fine vertical white stripes on his Bermuda shorts were reminiscent of the pinstriped suits of corporate executives of yesteryear, if not mafia bosses, and his tank top always matched, as did his recycled plastic flip-flops.

— Oh! Stromboli is spying the bad guys. — He watched the monitor while nibbling on a croissant.

— A hawk circling high in the sky doesn't surprise anyone.

Everyone thinks it's looking for its next meal, without knowing that its next meal is those who are watching it — commented Tapis solemnly, wrapped tightly in his multi-purpose jacket like a moth in its cocoon.

— But how much autonomy does Stromboli have? That is, how long can it fly before needing to be recharged?

— Eh... it depends a bit on how you ride, Vic. Flying in a straight line for a few hours, like the e-bikes of the past with assistance level one.

— I see, and how long does it take to recharge?

— It's complicated. With the quick one, it's done in ten minutes, otherwise at least an hour. But with the quick one, the batteries suffer in the long run.

— In short, the coverage is decent during the day — Tapis commented.

— But what about at night??

— But at night... no.

— Sorry Tap?

— I mean that at night, Stromboli is not equipped for infrared vision.

— Ah, ok.

— In any case, at night the bad guys sleep and even Stromboli can rest. As good as it is, it does what it can, like everyone else.

Flieg didn't think it was such a brilliant answer, but Tapis had proven on many occasions that he knew what he was talking about, so it was good enough. Vic pointed out to his friends that perhaps with Scwhà's help, Stromboli's performance could be improved. It was just an idea because he realised that meddling in matters concerning a trinity was a delicate matter, but for the sake of discussion, she felt compelled to say it. Stromboli could be put in a position to feed himself, Vic continued, just as she did, converting even wine into direct current (with certain results!); Stromboli could recharge himself by eating mice, wild rabbits or whatever else he could find. In reality, he could convert anything into direct current, but for reasons of ecological camouflage, it was better that he only convert the natural prey of a hawk into direct current. If, for

example, he ate wild boar droppings and drank from a foul-smelling puddle, anyone who saw him might have wondered. But, Vic concluded, it was up to Draula and her other aspects to decide on the matter by discussing it; as he had said, his was only a contribution to the question. Draula, along with her other aspects, was not entirely opposed to the idea but had raised concerns about whether Stromboli's alien technology would be compatible with Schwà's post-human abilities. In the end, they all opted for a wait-and-see approach, in the sense that before making a decision, they would observe what happened in the meantime with Stromboli in classic mode. Flieg, on the sidelines of the discussion, thought that Vic's overflowing roundness, which evoked, as in Marcello Baleno's skull, the Greek letter pi if not the golden ratio, was sufficient guarantee of the proper functioning of post-human technology, but he did not want to interfere in the matter.

Notwithstanding the principle of uncertainty regarding the time in the tunnel, everyone knew it was late morning. Ottavia minore had arrived with the supplies ordered by Flieg. This was also confirmed by the number of times Stromboli had recharged his device. The warrior's fritters, crisp and fragrant, were on the table in the central office. No one was distracted by Marcello's monitor. Stromboli kept his eyes closed during the slow recharge, and only a diffuse, opaque light appeared on the monitor, produced by all frequencies of a given amplitude, which was very reminiscent of white noise. The semi-darkness entering through the door of the subsidiary agency, in addition to causing the chitin of the agency's furnishings to emit plutonic glows, spread the buzz of the interstitial beings busy in the central shaft; it sounded like the murmur of a stream, and this too was reminiscent of white noise. Between pancakes, Flieg kept an eye on Calypso's earrings, but he was distracted by Vic's tank top and couldn't imagine where the android's battery could be: buttocks, breasts, endoskeleton, what else? Another mystery to solve, he thought. Calypso and Draula were joking about gravitational waves, while Schwà did his best to hide his disgust for the pancakes, sucking various catabolites from a sealed thermos; perhaps the exhausted solution of a hydroponic pea culture.

— Gasp... what's that... a TV? There's a certain smell coming from this agency... what do you say, Tap? The fritters are finished and I have to make do with coffee? Let's hope it's good. — Annibale Birillo was one-eyed but had a keen sense of smell and a passion for food. Since Stromboli Ottimo Massimo had left for reconnaissance, the images were once again clear on Marcello's monitor.

— This thing of using random words that you don't know the meaning of just because they sound cool is becoming a meme, don't you think, Cali?

— Mm...

— Mm... is that a yes or a no?

— It might be Flieg. Let's see how it develops.

— Ramen.

— Are you kidding me?

— No, no Cali... it's just the Pastafarian way of saying, 'so be it.'

— Ah...

Ottavia minore had brought the coffee along with the warrior's fritters. It was still hot, black, strong and bitter like life (?) because it had been kept in a black chitin thermos. Everyone was sipping it, except Scwhà and Draula. The post-human aversion to good things was well known, and Draula, as a teenager, did not yet drink coffee; for her other aspects, the question did not even arise. They were sipping it from transparent plastic cups that looked like glass, which were exclusive to the Ottavia minore post station. As they drank, they reflected on the images Stromboli was sending.

— Wow, there are so many of them! That Marcello Baleno and his differential equations... whatever they are, they seem to work — commented Birillo.

Outside the Tunnel, at that latitude, the seasons continued their annoying alternation (in the tropics or at the equator, everything is much more uniform). Tapis estimated that it must be late spring or early summer and, to be precise, late afternoon. He estimated this from the glints emanating from the long knives of the Assassins reaching Stromboli's quantum eyes, which were then triangulated to Baleno's monitor via entanglement, etc. In any case, he shared the estimation of the beverendo Annibale Birillo on the number of

enemies. Annibale, like Calipso, always dressed the same way, his white hair puffing out from his grey tank top and his pirate hat pulled down over his forehead.

— But weren't reinforcements supposed to arrive? — asked Flieg worriedly — Does anyone know anything? Let's not forget that Marcello said that in a week Dino Nora would convince the Assassins to enter the Tunnel and smash everything up. I think it won't be long now.

— Should we be concerned?

— Not even in your dreams, beautiful lady with enviable health — Annibale Birillo, like a true gentleman, replied to Calypso. — With Mikos' last caravan, a message also arrived from our friend Tonino of Utica, who apologises profusely but cannot attend the party (battle), but has sent a man he trusts: Dino Sala. It is true that he is an assassin, but one of the good ones. He distinguished himself last year during the great battle against the Metal. With him comes the interstitial swarm, and everyone is eager to fight.

Schwà, si appoggiava al bastone parlante come il maestro Yoda, esibendo quello che tra i suoi simili doveva essere considerato un sorrisetto furbo. Stava scambiando opinioni con Vic su qualcosa di importante. A Flieg sembrava che i capelli di Vic fossero cresciuti di almeno un centimetro quel pomeriggio, per quante frittelle aveva convertito in corrente continua. Le bermuda tattiche di Vic, verde militare e con ampie tasche sporgenti, erano intonate alla canottiera mimetica al limite della lacerazione. Calipso era silenziosa e anche i suoi orecchini sembravano immobili, Draula stava coccolando Etna che sembrava preoccupata per l'intenso lavoro di Stromboli, presto sarebbe tornato e avrebbero potuto riposarsi; almeno fino al giorno dopo.

— On the other hand, we haven't been sitting around doing nothing — continued the Beverend Birillo — Our group of raiders is ready to support the interstitial swarm and break the backs... um... I mean, smash the heads of the bad guys. Since the ways of the Prodigious One are infinite, as he pleases, tomorrow we will all be reunited for Friday's "pastaover" and I will have the pleasure of reminding the interstitial horde what needs to be done, Ramen.

— Something doesn't add up — said Calipso, who had recovered from her thoughts, while Tapis thanked Birillo for his support. The Beverendo was leaving because no one had mentioned dinner and he was hungry.

— And that would be?

— But isn't the Prodigious One also the god of bad guys, Flieg? How can Birillo convince him to abandon the Assassins and favour him? What if the others do the same? Who wins and who loses? And why?

— Let's leave theological matters to the theologians... — Tapis, the wise man, concluded. — It is never wise to meddle in religious matters. Let's think about practical things; what shall we eat after the pancakes?

Everyone agreed that choosing the two Ottavias was the best option. Draula would stay at the Agency to look after Stromboli, who was exhausted, and Etna, who was dead tired. They would bring them some fritters and a leaf of hydroponic lettuce later. As they set off optimistically towards the post station, Tapis barely noticed that the rooms in the subsidiary agency had been arranged so that Flieg and Calipso would be sleeping together. It wasn't important, he just noticed it.

The third dimension

The interstitial swarm, which had arrived in the meantime, consisted of: good assassins, simple interstitials and devout Pastafarians. The *primus inter pares* was Dino Sala, who had many recognised merits to his credit, earned during the great battle of the previous year against the Metal. The swarm arriving from Utica was joined by simple interstitials from Zama, the resident Dexiti and the infamous group of raiders led by Annibale Birillo: the MAS (*memento audere semper*). The extended swarm filled half of Zama, from the Pastafarian Church to the Topodromo, which is to say all the way to Comida da Furia Tranquilla, which at that moment was very busy along with the two Ottavie. They had to manage an unprecedented

number of hungry and thirsty customers and had therefore joined forces. Not that they had looked askance at each other before, they were just competitors. Like any self-respecting swarm, the extended one was self-organising and displaying emergent behaviour. The humanitarian snake (corridor) had formed to let the waiters (they were female and male, but everyone called them waiters, as in the old days) distribute food and drinks to everyone who needed them, in exchange for a ridiculous bitcoin transaction charged to the tunnel company. Calipso's idea of financing the fighters had been accepted after spreading like a virus. While construction frenzy raged throughout Zama, because everyone wanted a place to pass out after the celebrations marking the start of hostilities, the humanitarian snake had taken over the Trasimeno avenue, keeping it open for gastronomic communications.

There were almost no straight lines in Zama. The walkway in the central canal, called Viale del Trasimeno (no one knew why), was not as straight as a former railway embankment might suggest, but winding and full of surprises. The Topodromo, La Comida da Furia Tranquilla and the station of the two Ottavie, for example. If a group of chitinous constructions, or old railway carriages (or parts of carriages) expanded towards the centre of the tunnel, the other structures, on the opposite side of the tunnel, adapted to the situation and expanded in length. In short, the snake was not a simple corridor, but rather a complex two-dimensional tangle with some three-dimensional escape routes, which fitted harmoniously into the urban fabric of Zama. Given the "curvy" nature of the tunnel walls and the fact that the tracks had long since disappeared, it was difficult to see anything massive and unattractive, such as certain reinforced concrete structures from at least two centuries earlier. The city's development was driven more by chance and necessity. A residence here and a hydroponic greenhouse there, with a reinforced chitin loft above to create a living room with a beautiful view of the central cane walkway. Small shops displayed edible products made from mushrooms or coloured plastic items such as plates and cups, with workshops in the back equipped with 3D printers or kitchens and stoves for processing mushrooms. Each unit had a tank of

bioluminescent bacteria to produce direct current, and almost everyone had their heads shaved because of the energy tax; the bacteria were crazy about the melanin in human hair, producing a swarm of electrons that meekly queued up in the cables that carried them to their destiny. The 3D printers trapped and then used the micro-fragments of coloured plastic that were omnipresent in the air and in the underwear of everyone living in the former Europe, using a process invented by Schwà, thereby achieving two important results: purifying the air and boosting the economy (nothing like this had ever been seen in the former Europe). All the chitin works were interstitial to the highest degree. In the sense that they adapted to the environment, exploiting unthinkable spaces, but also helped to shape the ecosystem by spreading like a plant, wherever its roots found the necessary humus. Zama had the charm of cities that grew without a master plan but followed the whims of the moment, like the Rocinha favela or ancient cities, and the functionality of a homeostatic ecosystem.

Since the interstitial swarm had to rest between skirmishes, battles against the bad guys and the final revelry, Zama had added a third dimension to herself. This was accomplished in the space of a day, while everyone waited for the evening “pastaover”, the two Ottavias and Furia Tranquilla slaving away with the waiters along the humanitarian snake. With a creative explosion, aerial platforms made of treated, resistant chitin appeared, each connected to the other, new homes for assassins or interstitial or whatever. A handful of daredevils had managed to create a penthouse by somehow securing an old railway carriage to the curved half-wall of the Tunnel, at the height of the nearby aerial platforms, to which it was connected by bridges, cables and other indefinable things. It even had stairs to go up or down, depending on one's desire. The aerial connections were necessary for social exchanges with the neighbourhood, so you could borrow salt or have a drink together and discuss the events of the day. With the addition of the third dimension, Zama would be known from that day onwards as Zama the splendid. The aerial landscape was very reminiscent of the tree in Avatar.

The *oratio magistralis* of Annibale Birillo

— Interstitials! Or whatever else you think you are... there are no prejudices here, except for those out there. And since we don't like rhetoric, I'll be brief: LET'S BEAT THEM UP WITH THE HELP OF THE PRODIGIOUS ONE!

Many of the citizens of Zama the splendid had gathered in front of the Pastafarian Church, where the Beverend Annibale Birillo was giving his *oratio* on the upcoming battle, before Friday's pastaover. That is, before everyone started eating spaghetti with meat sauce, the Pastafarian communion with the Prodigious Flying Spaghetti Monster, and drinking beer. Since the Draula subsidiary agency was close to the Church, Tapis had set up Baleno's monitor on a table just outside the door. For the benefit of all those who could not see the monitor, he had placed a spherical holographic emitter on Stromboli's perch (who was on reconnaissance) that projected everything that appeared on the monitor. In this way, all the interstitial in the vicinity, even those who did not want to, could see how many assassins were camped outside the tunnel. And they saw it in 3D, an evanescent blue hologram that matched the cobalt flashes that the evening twilight cast in the Tunnel. Stromboli ottimo massimo was working overtime because, as Draula's third aspect, he realised that this was an important moment. The images, triangulated via entanglement etc. by Stromboli's quantum eyes, came through loud and clear. The long knives glinting in the setting sun, the black beards and fluttering clothes (it was windy outside the Tunnel) spoke volumes, and the information reached everywhere, even those who had found shelter in the third dimension. Draula was sitting near the table holding the ashtray with Etna inside, nibbling on a leaf of hydroponic lettuce. Calipso was showing off her lightning bolt earrings because she thought it was important to contribute, her transparent tank top was freshly laundered and she looked relaxed despite the aggressive earrings. Flieg had grown tired of watching Calypso's earrings to see how she changed them without anyone noticing, and was sampling one of the warrior's fritters as an

appetiser. Everyone was sure that the battle would be fought the next day, if not that night. Vic and Schwà were devising a plan that would favour, if not influence, the outcome of the confrontation in their favour. And everyone was sitting together with the other interstitials, listening attentively to Annibale as he continued his *oratio* after a dramatic pause, giving valuable advice to the fighters.

— Stay close to your partner and do what he does, or smash the enemy's head in! Avoid obstacles! When you win, feast!

— EEEH? — Exclaimed in unison by all the interstitial beings present, including those from the third dimension.

— They are the rules... the precious rules we must follow... one: stay close to your comrades, two: smash the enemy's head, three: avoid obstacles. And when you win, feast. If you lose, you don't have to worry about anything anymore.

— AAAH! — Exclaimed in unison by all the interstitial present.

— Interstitial! — Continued the Beverend Birillo — now that everything is clear, let's get on with the celebrations, otherwise the pasta will overcook. Do we want to disappoint the Prodigious One? Tomorrow, the first one to wake up will kick the others and we'll all set off with optimism to beat those guys out there. Ramen.

— Ramen! — Exclaimed once again in unison by all the interstitials who were also observant Pastafarians. The others simply nodded in agreement or approved in some other way.

The legendary Dino Sala

— What did you think of the exhortation, Dino?

— Concise and to the point, I would say Tap. The Beverend is not the type to get lost in pompous chatter.

Tapis and Dino had met the year before fighting together and successfully leading the attack on the rear of the Metal at the north gate of the tunnel, near what was left of Innsbruck. After Hannibal's touching speech, everyone sought comfort in southern food and wine. Dino Sala sat down with his friends from the Two Octavias, saying he wanted to strengthen his friendship with Tapis and get to

know the others better. Draula and his other aspects were exhausted from the long day's work and, like the night before, stayed at the Agency to rest. Later, they would bring something tasty for them. Schwà tried as always to hide his disgust for human food, sucking a cocktail of unmentionable catabolites from his sealed thermos with a plastic straw. Next to him sat Vic, who had attacked the warrior's fritters with the vigour typical of androids; her tank top was swelling visibly. Flieg was sitting next to Calipso but was distracted by Vic's tank top and missed the moment when Calipso changed her earrings, which were now shaped like the Prodigious Flying Spaghetti Monster, with "spaghetti" appendages indicating the transparency of the tank top. Tapis, more sensitive to metaphysics than food, empathically nibbled on a fritter, huddled in his multi-purpose jacket like a marmot in its burrow. Dino Sala had removed his blue cloth turban, revealing his thick, black hair. How blue his eyes were could already be seen, but before, you couldn't see that his skin was also blue because the turban covered part of it. He also had sculpted pectorals that seemed to want to burst out of his off-white linen tunic. This did not escape Calypso, who was now staring mesmerised at his face and then at his chest. Flieg was tempted to put a hand on her shapely thigh to try to control the situation.

— If you're wondering why my skin is blue, it's because of the colour used for our turbans. Since we often cover our faces to protect ourselves from coloured microplastics (once from sand), the pigment sticks to our skin due to sweat, which is why we turn blue.

— Oh... really? But the colour doesn't come off? Not even if you wash it?

— But *pulcherrima*, of course it will go away, but it's a long and hard process. — A compliment in a language that is now dead should never be underestimated.

— Oh... long, hard? But... couldn't you be more circumcised? — Calypso was also attracted by Dino's hands, which didn't seem like hands, but instruments of pleasure.

— Sorry? — Dino, a little surprised — I don't think it's possible to make it any shorter than this. My father cut it when I was four years old.

— What? — A terrified Calypso who had jumped out of her chair. — You mean they cut you... you mean you no longer have...

— Yes yes, my father cut it off. He cut off my foreskin when I was a child and then disinfected everything with ash. As is traditional.

— Ah... you mean that... for a moment I was afraid... um... I thought they had cut off your... oh, never mind, I'm really confused, I must have had too much wine.

Flieg hadn't missed a word of the conversation between Calipso and Dino, looking now at one, now at the other with concern because of the fascination the blue man had over her. But he had also solved the mystery of her earrings. Perhaps to confirm his jealousy, he had watched Calipso closely while Dino told his story and had seen her pendants turn into a pulsar-red phallus when he talked about the foreskin and so on. Then, when Calipso had regained her interstitial aplomb, they had resumed the shape of the Prodigious One.

— Yes, sometimes wine confuses, but mostly it infuses (joy). Perhaps the word Cali wanted to use was precise and not circumcised. But let's drink to it. Would you like some wine, Dino? — said Flieg as he put his hand on Calypso's thigh.

After assuring the *pulcherrima* that there was no problem in getting words wrong every now and then, he replied that he would gladly try it, even though he preferred their traditional drink: tea. And that if they wanted, they could try it too, because he had brought a small jar full with him, so as not to arrive empty-handed, he said. He also explained that he had three types. The strong one to prepare for battle, the medium one to quench thirst and the sweet one to prepare for love. Flieg, who had discovered a new way to understand what was going through Calypso's mind, tirelessly checked her earrings, which seemed to be fixed on the Prodigious One.

Between a glass of wine and a small glass of tea, the discussion had moved on to war topics. Vic and Schwà were talking to Tapis and Dino about various strategies to better defeat the bad guys out there and how and when it would be best to attack, and so on. Dino had settled down, he said, with his tribe of Berbers a stone's throw

away, in the third dimension, which had now become the official name of the new district of Zama la splendida. They would sleep fully clothed and with one eye open, ready to go into battle with optimism. At a certain hour, it became clear to everyone that if they wanted to get some rest, now was the time. Tapis had asked the two Ottavias for a basket with some fritters and a lettuce leaf for Draula and her other aspects. As soon as he had paid the bill with an infinitesimal fraction of bitcoin, they set off for the Agency and the battle of the following day.

Cap. 8 — The Battle of Hatting

- Has anyone seen Vic and Schwà?
- I haven't seen them since last night, Cali.

Calipso wore gladius-shaped earrings to prepare for battle. She and Flieg were not yet fully awake, and the twilight of night still lingered through the windows of the Agency's central office. Only the interstitials could distinguish the twilight of night from that of day; for everyone else, the uncertainty principle applied. Stromboli Ottimo Massimo was already at work, and Marcello's monitor showed the Assassins' camp at Hatting's Horns, still immersed in the quiet of the night. Out of consideration for the war situation, Draula had adopted a camouflage look for her clothing. After taking off her canary yellow pyjamas, which matched the previous day's look, she had put on military green shorts and a tank top with a design reminiscent of a Mesoamerican rainforest. After putting on tactical boots with neoprene soles instead of the more elegant but less practical (in action) flip-flops, she offered to go and get breakfast from the two Ottavias. Everyone would be wearing neoprene boots that day for good luck, even Calypso and Flieg, who hadn't given up their civilian clothes: a semi-transparent tank top for Calypso and blue striped Bermuda shorts for Flieg. As soon as Tapis woke up, he would put on his boots, like everyone else. He was still asleep because, like Caesar, he had stayed up late working on battle plans.

The interstitial swarm had prepared for what would go down in history as the Battle of the Horns of Hatting, even though most of the fighting would take place inside Zama. The day before, Dino Sala

and his team had carved out a large loft of reinforced chitin (it had to hold about ten blue men) in the third dimension, the new district of Zama la splendida, and furnished it simply with colourful rugs scattered here and there. In the centre was a stove that was used for both cooking and making tea. The rugs were used for sleeping, eating and also for chatting, crouched on top of them. In short, it was a manly place where curved swords and long knives leaning against the wall marked out individual spaces. Not to be outdone by Hannibal Birillo's raiders, they slept fully clothed with their weapons within reach. There were also two windows overlooking the central barrel and from the door you could see the Pastafarian Church.

Dino Sala and Annibale Birillo woke up at the same time (which was surprising, if not metaphysical), when the darkness of night still enveloped everything like a womb. Dino had descended from the third dimension with his tribe as soon as he had drunk his first cup of strong, bitter tea to prepare for battle. They then headed optimistically towards the Pastafarian church to wake up the beverendo and his raiders. Not to be outdone by the assassins, they had slept dressed and armed in the large hall where Pastaover was celebrated every Friday. As there were benches and tables, some had slept on top of them and others underneath. The beverendo Birillo, to cement the spirit of the group, had eaten with his men the previous evening, as in Sparta. As soon as he saw Dino and his gang approaching, he adjusted his pirate uniform, which was a little creased because he had used it as pyjamas, and welcomed them with a bottle of mushroom grappa in his hand. He said that a little drink first thing in the morning put him in the right mood for fighting. Dino apologised, saying that they had drunk their battle tea and were already in the right mood. Annibale was understanding and decided to share the contents of the bottle with his raiders.

The pastaover room was large and occupied almost the entire section of the Tunnel. The aroma of coffee laced with Mikos, the infamous mushroom grappa, which had spread throughout the room, had convinced even the laziest to wake up. The eight raiders plus Hannibal made nine in total. The interstitial regard even numbers with horror, as they remind them too much of the dualism

that does not exist (they claim), and in order to avoid exhausting philosophical doubts, they prefer to face the world from an odd perspective. Two legs and two arms have no meaning for them; they refer to limbs as parts of a larger set of objects useful for sustenance and walking. Which, when you think about it, is not entirely wrong. The raiders were dressed as pirates. There were plenty of fake black eye patches (which they would have removed in battle), crossed tibias and skulls as decorations on their black hats pulled down over their foreheads. There were also fish bones, almost certainly 3D printed and bought at Olivia's bazaar, stuck on their tactical chitin jackets. Their weapons: sabres, cutlasses and pirate hooks clanged as they slapped each other on the back and drank grappa and coffee. A group of fighters eager for action and chanting victory (?) had formed among Dino Sala's raiders and Berbers; as they spoke loudly to make themselves heard, they woke up the whole of Zama.

— I think Vic and Schwà are already in position, although I don't know where, because of the spell they were talking about last night — said Draula, who had just returned from the two Ottavias with cappuccino and croissants. The two Ottavias and Furia Tranquilla had woken up in the middle of the night; they wanted to prepare the supplies that would give energy to the virile fighters and strengthen their wallets with mini bitcoin transfers.

— I think you're right, Drauli — Flieg's mouth is watering at the thought of those warm, fragrant croissants — as soon as Tap is ready, let's head to our battle stations.

The night before, Vic and Schwà had devised a plan to help fuel the enthusiasm of the interstitial swarm. The android and the post-human had decided that it would be better to fight in the Tunnel rather than in the open. Aided by the darkness of the Zama night and its cobalt flashes, they had convinced themselves that it was better to face the bad guys in their own home rather than in theirs. Flieg had pointed out, while drinking his second glass of grappa, that the problem was getting them to come in. He said that given the good weather, those outside might decide to scratch their bellies in the sun for an indefinite period of time; or at least until the sausages ran out. Schwà said, in his usual manner, as if he had a stone in his

mouth, that he was sure he could get them in. Vic unconditionally supported the idea of the post-human, Draula, who was already in his pyjamas, had no objections to it or any of its other aspects. Tapis, serious as always, had made it known that if he ever came up with a better idea, he would share it, but in the meantime he supported the plan.

— Here I am, is there a croissant left? — Tapis arrived wearing black boots and a crumpled multi-purpose jacket, which he had used as a pyjama top. — As soon as we finish breakfast, we'll head to our stations. Are you ready, Flieg?

— Wait a minute... there's a croissant left.

Given that since classical antiquity no one fought before the age of sixteen (first with bronze swords and then with iron ones), Draula and her second aspect Etna would remain in the command room (central office) to observe the progress of the battle on Marcello's monitor. Just to avoid surprises, which by their nature are unexpected events. In short, intelligence gathering. Calipso, who thought fighting was a man's job, had decided to stay with Draula to help her recharge Stromboli, just in case she needed it, but also because they were both women and therefore found it easier to understand each other.

Vic was also female in appearance (and how!), albeit artificial, but her presence was more useful alongside Schwà because of the Trasimeno spell. Why they called the spell Trasimeno was unknown, perhaps in honour of the avenue that wound its way through the beautiful town of Zama and was so narrow that if the bad guys ended up there, it would be easy to convince them that entering had been a bad idea. The problem of how to dispose of them, whether dead or unconscious, would have arisen, but as is often the case in the Tunnel, problems are dealt with when they arise, and it is said that it is never convenient to worry in advance.

As soon as the first photon contributed to illuminating the small lake formed by the Isarco at the Hatting horns, Schwà prepared to cast the Trasimeno spell. He and Vic had hidden themselves, just like quails, among the rocks and bushes above the southern entrance to

the Tunnel. This gave them a superb view (?) of the enemy camp (enemy always in the figurative sense). The photons, which were arriving in industrial quantities, showed the camp still asleep.

The enemy camp

The evening barbecue had lasted longer than expected because Flavio Anfiteatro, who had a formidable appetite, had been invited; there was no guarantee that he would be welcome, but he didn't care. Because it was late, everyone was still asleep. Dino Nora was in his tent and everyone else, including Flavio, had ended up there after their last sip of beer before falling asleep (losing consciousness). Since the secret agent (Flavio) had to have a full stomach in order to respond without hesitation and with complete satisfaction to his clients, they had finished off the sausage supply. Then they had become terribly thirsty and had finished off the beer supply. Around the campfire, in front of Dino Nora's tent, Flavio Anfiteatro had recounted the wonders of the Holy Catino. The grim but virile assassins with blue turbans, blue skin and large knives, sometimes swords, hanging from their belts had observed the little man who claimed to know everything about the Catino with more curiosity than anything else. The little man resembled an amphora: he had a swollen belly and a bald head resting gracelessly on his narrow shoulders. While the fire caused the Assassins' weapons to glow red, and Flavio tried hard not to consider it a bad omen, he recounted in his hissing voice (like Gollum) how desirable it was to get hold of the Catino. For, he had argued, whoever possessed the Catino could have everything, absolutely everything he wanted. Should he perhaps mention gold, money, power, authority over everyone, or was it enough to remind them, the agent had insisted, that they could have slaves, young, shapely and slutty? Whose desire, he continued, would be to invent erotic games to make the most of the valiant warriors' free time.

The commotion caused by the combined hormonal storms of the warriors was still ongoing when Dino Nora began to observe the little

man who was speaking. The warriors' weapons continued to emit red flashes reminiscent of a necromancer's frenzy, and Stromboli Ottimo Massimo circled above the camp, observing and recording everything. Meanwhile, Dino thought, the supposed secret agent looked like a coat rack with a tunic hanging on it, but the question was whether he was telling the truth or making fun of them. He watched him smooth his beard on his chin and wondered if all those sausages had been a good investment. In a hierarchical environment, those at the top are usually humans who are "more" than the others. Smarter, more intelligent, more beautiful (not always), more asshole, and so on. In a networked environment, there is no top, but there are other problems. When he (Dino Nora) heard about the slaves, he felt a familiar sensation below the waistband of his tunic, but he tried to ignore it and figure out what to do with the little man. In short, he behaved like a good boss. As he scratched his right cheek, displaying a spectacular contraction of his biceps, almost as big as Flavio's chest, he didn't know what to do. He then tried to adjust his turban a little better on his long black hair, but he still had no ideas, not even adjusting his tunic over his granite pectorals gave him any ideas. The only thing that came to mind was the urge to swear, so he raised his eyes to the sky to begin a meaningful string of expletives, but just then he saw Stromboli in the light of the full moon. Since it is unusual to see a hawk flying at night (it is easier to see an owl, although not so high up), he decided that it could only be a sign from the gods, in whom he did not believe. Consequently, he decided to give the bald little man with the strange name a chance; they would invade the Tunnel tomorrow, after breakfast. Almost certainly, if Dino Nora had known that the hawk he had seen was not a hawk but an animaloid, he would have made different decisions. But they had come this far and the die was cast (?). Freed from the burden of decision, Dino Nora joined the rowdy troop. They continued to slap each other on the back and make noise until the last beer was finished, then they fell asleep in their respective places.

The photons, which were now all that was needed, even if filtered by the usual layer of clouds (which seems to be characteristic of

alpine locations), showed the evening's fires that had just turned into piles of ash, from which a wisp of smoke was still rising. From the southern entrance of the tunnel, not far away, something was moving in the direction of the still sleepy camp. A hologram was approaching: dreamlike, perhaps ectoplasmic, certainly calypsomorphic, with a kind of basin or chalice (depending on one's desires) in its right hand. The beautiful oriental woman's transparent tank top was recognisable (a transparency within holographic transparency, a masterpiece), her nipples stood out like nutmegs in the rounded curves of her breasts, and her translucent Bermuda shorts wrapped around buttocks whose spherical perfection made pi look like a lesser relative. The hologram proceeded towards the warriors' camp with refined sensuality. As soon as she was within earshot, she whispered: 'What's going on, friends? Why are you sleeping when all the joys of the world, but what am I saying, of the universe await you? Come... follow me. As she said this, her earrings, forged in the shape of shiny condoms in their unopened packaging, emitted erotic flashes reflecting the light of the rising sun and the dying moon; the flashes struck the warriors' eyelids directly.

A breakfast of tea and biscuits was no match for the hologram's sensual invitation. As soon as the group's synaptic connections had paired up, the idea of lighting the fire and making tea didn't even cross their minds. The only thing they all wanted was to catch the Calipso-like hologram, to see if it was true that they could have everything (and we mean everything) they wanted. Satisfied that she had aroused the warriors' interest, the holographic Calipso was moving away from the camp towards the entrance to the tunnel, not forgetting to turn around every now and then, coquettishly, to invite the warriors to follow her. She swayed her hips with some effectiveness to dissuade them from going back to make tea for Dino Nora. Meanwhile, Dino Nora was waking up to the noise and the hoarse, sensual cries of the warriors running after the hologram. Not yet fully awake, he thought that those hoarse cries were not befitting a horde of warriors; they should have aroused horror and revulsion, not sensuality. It was a short step from amazement to anger, just enough time to wake up completely and discover that no

one had made him tea and biscuits. Flavio Anfiteatro was still sleeping curled up near the chief's tent in his secret agent's tunic. When he managed to put together a meal like the one the night before, he could sleep for two days to digest it all, like snakes and crocodiles. Dino Nora woke him with a kick and let him know how disappointed he was.

— What the fuck is going on, you weirdly named little man? If I find out it's your fault, I'll cut off your dick, slice it up, roast it, and make you eat it before I chop off your head with my sabre.

— Um... what do you mean, boss? That no one made you tea and biscuits? If you want, I can make some right now... boss. — Flavio hadn't yet noticed the calipsomorphic hologram.

— I'm talking about the fact that all my warriors are running after that thing — pointing to the thirty-two warriors running after the holographic Calipso — and they've left their weapons here. You idiot!

Feeling threatened, Flavio Anfiteatro's synaptic connections went into overdrive. He immediately recognised the dreamlike Calipso and suspected that someone from the Tunnel was behind the trap (because it was definitely a trap). A hallucinogenic substance, a spell, who knows; these were strange and resourceful people. Dino Nora looked at him with his hands on his hips and his blue face turning black. The sabre, which Flavio already imagined drenched in his blood (a cliché), hung ominously from Dino's belt, the leader's dirty tunic looked like any old tank top, highlighting his massive biceps but also his quadriceps, since he wasn't wearing trousers. The sun, indifferent as ever to human affairs, would soon rise in all its glory, and if Flavio hadn't come up with something, the worst would have happened. Every self-respecting swarm exhibits emergent behaviour: birds, ants, bees, neurons. The neural swarm confined within Flavio Anfiteatro's skull (approximately eighty-five billion neurons) was working overtime to come up with a solution. Anything, even the most miserable solution, would have been good, as long as it worked.

— Boss, this is a stroke of luck.

— What do you mean, homunculus? Patience is not my strong suit, so hurry up. In case you haven't noticed, my men are about to enter

the Tunnel, and their weapons are here.

— This is where the fun is! While they do the boring work, explaining to the interstitial beings why they came in, etc., you can steal the Holy Catino. It's not here in Utica, but further on in the Tunnel!

Flavio Anfiteatro was stringing together random phrases, hoping they would make some kind of sense. In other words, he had no idea what he was saying; it wasn't the best emerging behaviour, but he hoped it would be enough for the barbarian. The metallic sound of the sabre being drawn from Dino Nora's belt had, Flavio thought, a very clear meaning.

— Calm down, boss — Flavio tried not to imagine the sabre slicing him. — Behind the south door of the Tunnel is Zama the splendid. But the Holy Catino is in Utica the mysterious, which is a little further on. I know because the interstitial madmen told me so. Now, while your men argue with them, that is, do their job, you can go to Utica and steal the Catino.

— All right. Let's go to mysterious Utica. — Dino said after a couple of seconds of reflection.

— Sorry boss?

— Are you stupid as well as an idiot? I said let's go to Utica, etc...

— Through the tunnel? But I suffer from claustrophobia.

— You're getting over it.

— What if I can't and I die?

— One less job for my sabre.

— But we have to hurry, my legs are shorter than yours, boss, I'll slow you down.

— I'll hit you over the head, stuff you in a backpack, and then we'll go. I don't know if you've noticed my quadriceps.

— If I promise to keep quiet, will you spare me the blow to the head?

— Grunt... maybe. All that remains to be understood, although it's not relevant unless you're bluffing or playing a double or even triple game, is what happened to my men.

— I think it's a spell or some kind of psychotropic substance used by the interstitial, which acts on their desires. But you, boss? Why

didn't it work on you?

- I already have everything I want. You idiot!
- So why do you want to go to mysterious Utica?
- Because I want even more.
- Ah! Got it.

Flavio thought that the time he had left before tasting the blade of Dino's sabre was not much. It would expire as soon as the assassin discovered his miserable bluff. To tell the truth, there was a single, negligible probability (one in who knows how many millions) that the Holy Catino, whatever it was, was to be found in Utica, Flavio Anfiteatro said to himself.. And what of the infinitesimal probability that this Catino (assuming it was there) was connected with Dino Nora's desires and expectations? A big gosh was finding its way from Flavio's neurons to his guts. Almost as if to confirm the fact that bad (like good) is never absolute (another interstitial conviction), his miserable bluff had earned him at least a little extra life expectancy. And in the meantime, anything could happen.

The ambush at Trasimeno

— They're coming, Calipso, did you see? — Said Draula, pointing to Marcello's monitor on the desk in the Agency's central office.

— Yes, they're all still in their pyjamas and they look like they're possessed. It seems like they're trying to grab something that's slipping away. Um... I think Schwà has something to do with it. Wouldn't it be better to ask Stromboli to come in and perch somewhere high up? That way we can watch the battle live without going out and risking getting hit?

— Good idea, we do it right away. — Draula spoke in the third person when referring to the Trinity, and this was not a problem.

The calipsomorphic hologram was only visible to the assassins because Schwà had directed the hallucinatory ray at them. The beam emanated from the post-human's talking stick and, as it was quite energy-intensive, it had a limited range (to save energy). Dino Nora was almost out of range of the beam because when he woke

up, his men were halfway to the Tunnel, so he had not been affected; he had only seen the men running after something ectoplasmic, albeit female in appearance, emitting strange sounds. That's why he thought he was stronger, better or smarter than the others; in reality, he wasn't running in his pyjamas after a hologram just for the sake of saving energy. Vic wasn't under the spell because she was an android, but she was curious and had asked Schwà what it was that attracted the Assassins so much. He replied that it was a combination of sexual pheromones, which travelled together with the hallucinatory ray and images, without specifying which ones, thus remaining vague. Vic then asked him to be more specific, and as soon as she learned that he had generated a calipsomorphic hologram, she looked at him with wide eyes as if to say: — really? — The colour of the post-human's face turned burnt sienna, the equivalent of embarrassment in a normal human, and he looked at her without saying anything. In any case, he had the look of someone who had done the wrong thing for the right reason. Vic then realised that she had behaved inappropriately (jealousy?) and immediately tried to smooth things over by saying that she wasn't jealous at all, just amazed by the genius of the idea, and so on. Schwà, who had initially considered using Vic's image for the hologram but then opted for Calipso, he knew why, pretended to believe her and everything was settled.

Regardless, it was time to come out of hiding and take control of the situation inside the Tunnel, since the Assassins were now just a stone's throw away. Partly to free himself from embarrassment and partly because he had to, the post-human came out of hiding and, since he was invisible thanks to the talking stick, blended in with the ectoplasmic mass of the hologram. Vic would only come out after the last assassin had entered the Tunnel and followed them, keeping to the shadows and ready for anything. Stromboli's watchful eye, which saw everything and transmitted it to Marcello's monitor via entanglement, etc., followed the group's entrance from the south door of the Tunnel. He was perched on a chitin ledge in the third dimension.

— I told you Schwà had something to do with it. Look at Draula,

he's bringing humans inside like a pied piper with rats.

On the monitor in the Agency's central office, the post-human little man could be seen prancing around almost as if dancing (as if he were enjoying himself), waving his talking stick in the air. Behind him came the horde of Assassins in pyjamas (they could still see the calypso-shaped hologram) shouting hoarsely, as if in a state of excitement. They all proceeded northwards, that is, towards the Agency's subsidiary.

— I don't know how he does it, but I like it. What do you think, Drauli?

— True, Cali. I wonder what we'll do when they get here, though. Where are our people?

— In my opinion, they won't make it here.

— What do you mean?

— Let's see... I have a feeling there's going to be a surprise soon.

Just before the piper and his victims reached the middle of Trasimeno Avenue, almost in the centre of beautiful Zama, the energy flow from Schwà's post-human metabolism had abruptly stopped. No more hallucinatory rays came out of the talking stick and the concentration of sex pheromones had plummeted. In the plutonic twilight of the Tunnel, the thirty-two warriors in pyjamas could hardly believe their eyes. Where a second before there had been a carnal promise, now there was a hobbling homunculus holding a stick reminiscent of Master Yoda's. As if that weren't enough, the homunculus was sienna-coloured, with several humps and sparse hair scattered everywhere. It was only a matter of moments before surprise turned to fury. Marco Antonio Psicopompo, in his capacity as deputy leader, took charge of the situation with determination; he did not seem at all disturbed by the fact that he was still in his pyjamas. Psicopompo was what you might call a bundle of nerves, thin as a rake (he was even the same colour) and able to eat like a horse and drink like a fish without putting on any weight (lucky him). His blue, gaunt face under his turban was marked by wrinkles that looked like bobsleigh tracks, and under his tunic he wore sandals that looked very much like those of a god from another age, with pretty little wings on the sides.

— You, you, and you, take that little man, he owes us an explanation — ordered Marco Antonio, pointing his finger at Schwà while looking at the men.

— The rest of you, look for anything that can be used as a weapon: stones, sticks, sharp pieces of this dark crap that I don't know what it is. Quick, quick!

— What little man boss? There's no one there anymore!

— Damn it, where did it go?

— Maybe in that gut, boss.

— Um... it could be an ambush. You five go ahead, we'll follow you. — Hierarchical magic... whoever's in charge always has their ass covered.

— Are we ready? Follow me! — Commanded Psicopompo, raising his nervous arm, which was wielding a piece of treated chitin that he had found by straining his eyes in the dim light.

The thirty-one warriors looked at each other as if to convince themselves that even though it wasn't proper to fight in pyjamas, they were there and might as well get on with it. Who knows where that girl with the generous curves had ended up. And why on earth did they have to run after that little man the colour of sienna? In short, the usual doubts of ordinary soldiers before battle.

The gut, which was actually the Trasimeno avenue, looked like a tunnel within a tunnel because of the third dimension, the interstitial neighbourhood that had sprung up just the day before. Even in the early morning twilight, the spherical shape of the Tunnel, enveloping the walls like of the small intestine do with its bacterial flora, made the third dimension the second wonder of the post-implosion world; the first was the Tunnel itself. Reinforced chitin plates embedded in the pipes running overhead formed the floor. Other shaped plates, embedded in some other indescribable way, gave momentum and curvature to the system of tunnels, large rooms and improbable columns. Here and there, ladders of all kinds, made of rope, reinforced chitin, or chitin but spiral-shaped, connected the aerial dimension to the horizontal one. A mushroom garden here, a hydroponic farm there, and a tank of bioluminescent bacteria a little further on added the finishing touch. As the curved chitin plates also

extended downwards, the Trasimeno avenue looked like a gut. If someone had cut the third dimension radially, the result would have been very similar to the section of an African or Australian termite mound. Flashes of sodium light would have highlighted the interstitial dens and shelters.

Since the Trasimeno avenue was winding and seemed passable in the first part, the warriors in pyjamas set off with unlikely optimism towards the Holy Catino, or so they thought. Heading north, the avenue curved first to the left and then to the right, and for the moment, the goal was a sort of widening that could be glimpsed a little further ahead. Trying to dispel the annoying (for him) morning gloom with the power of his mind, Marco Antonio followed the men, saying he was protecting their rear as he urged them to continue. Amidst leaden, if not cobalt-coloured reflections, the horde of warriors arrived at the Topodromo. Since they did not understand what the three tracks in front of a large reinforced chitin structure (Rodoviario) were, they stopped, making the Psicopompo nervous. In front of them, to the north, the gut narrowed and became dark, much darker, as if even the twilight was forbidden.

The battle

— Look, Cali, they're standing in the middle. Just like Vic and Schwà predicted.

Stromboli Ottimo Massimo was perched on a slab of chitin and watched the handful of warriors. Thanks to quantum entanglement, the images were transmitted to Marcello's monitor in the central office of the subsidiary agency. Flieg and Tapis had joined Calipso and Draula, ready for the ultimate sacrifice (?), in case the bad guys reached them without being intercepted by Annibale Birillo's raiders. Vic and Schwà were hiding somewhere in the Tunnel to observe the events, ready for anything.

— Here we are, guys, it's time. — Calipso, with her sword-shaped earrings glinting aggressively in the morning twilight. Flieg was anxious about the battle but also happy to have discovered the

secret of Calipso's morphing earrings. Draula and Tap were glued to the monitor showing everything that was happening or was about to happen.

— Men! Let's go back and get our weapons. — Marco Antonio Psicopompo, although in his pyjamas like everyone else, was the only one who had the presence of mind to put on his winged sandals, like a messenger of the gods, before running after the Calypso-like hologram; he was the deputy leader, after all, while the others were still in their slippers. The fact that the glint of their knives was conspicuously absent in the uncomfortable uterine twilight worried him, as did the fact that he did not have his staff of command.

— Boss? First you take us forward, and now you take us back? — The men were increasingly confused.

— Do you want to leave the middle world or not?

— Boss, aren't you being a bit cryptic?

— Grunt, do I really have to explain everything to you thickheads? We're about to fall into an ambush, if we haven't already, here in the middle world. Without weapons we're dead, with weapons we're probably dead too.

— That little man brings bad luck, the previous woman was better, even if she was transparent. — The wisdom of the troops.

— Silence! And turn back.

Psicopompo's winged sandals led the march back to the world above, where their camp and weapons were, which they were trying to reach so as not to end up in the world below, without glory and in their pyjamas. This time Marco Antonio was at the head of the group of warriors who were moving as fast as they could, trying to avoid broken sleepers and slabs of shaped chitin. Marco Antonio's sandals made a sound like crushed breadcrumbs as they ran lightly towards the north exit; the others' slippers were much quieter.

Shortly after the group of invaders had passed, running near the *mansio* of the Aristeriti (the good guys), in an attempt to reach the calipsomorphic hologram, a group of defending warriors (the good guys) emerged from the ravines, doors, and ogival windows of the

mansio; silent and armed with long knives that gave off lethal blue reflections, they set off in pursuit of the bad guys. Stromboli ottimo massimo, via entanglement etc., coordinated the actions of Birillo's raiders and the handful of good assassins, while the simple interstitial scattered here and there on their own. At almost the same moment, Annibale Birillo's fearsome raiders emerged from the Pastafarian church and headed south armed with sabres, knives and rusty iron hooks; they looked like a band of pirates going to board a ship loaded with pepper and other exotic spices.

The wings of the "psicopompi" sandals had sagged a few centimetres as soon as Marco Antonio had noticed the enemy horde (good assassins), whose knives gave off sinister cobalt flashes. Shortly after the last bend in the Trasimeno gut, but before the southern exit came into view, they were intercepted by a handful of their enemy colleagues, who seemed to be waiting for them. — Men! Run north, there must be another exit. — This time, without comment, the group of villains began to run in disarray towards the north, trying to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the enemy horde. Marco Antonio's sandals paved the way for the slippers of the fleeing warriors. Just as they reached the Topodromo, which was after the next bend, they found themselves face to face with Hannibal Birillo's band of pirates. The raiders were waiting calmly for them, playing with their sharp sabres and hooks. The sabres gave off their usual uranium glints in the twilight that enveloped the centre of Zama, and the crossed tibias and plastic skulls on their caps pressed down on their foreheads did not encourage the villains to take the initiative.

— Those rusty hooks could cause tetanus, boss... what should we do? — Everyone get inside that shack over there. — Pointing to the bus station — we'll sell our lives dearly.

As they took a few steps in the direction indicated by Marco Antonio, simple armed soldiers emerged from every door, window and crack in the Rodoviario. Some had stones, some had railway sleepers shaped like clubs, some had sinister-looking pieces of chitin, but they too seemed to be waiting for them with apparent calm. — Things are getting complicated, men... let's climb over those tracks

(Topodromo), if we can reach some of the huts up there... —They hadn't even taken a step in the direction of the Topodromo when simple interstitial armed with railway sleepers forged into clubs and other things that looked like slingshots emerged from the shacks above. The wings on the "psicopompi" sandals were completely deflated, as was the morale of the bad guys' troops.

— Who can I negotiate the surrender with? — Marco Antonio Psicopompo, pragmatically, after a nanosecond of reflection.

— Just like that, without any fun? — A voice that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

— I don't know if you've noticed, but we're in our pyjamas and slippers...

— Oh yes, you are very nice. — The giggles came from the shadows.

— Don't you have a boss?

— No.

— Not even someone representative? I don't know... a *primus inter pares*?

— Maybe...

— Will we have any guarantees?

— Give me an example.

— If we promise that once we get to our camp we'll get dressed and stay out of sight for a while, will you let us go?

— Try again.

— I see. So... if we promise to cook for you and wash the dishes for... um... let's say a week, will you let us go safely?

— You can still improve.

— Umpf... the only thing worse than this is corporal punishment in exchange for freedom.

— Bingo!

As often happens, bad luck begins to manifest itself quietly, almost imperceptibly. The plutonic twilight seemed to ripple, carrying a sound, barely audible, that could be interpreted as a pulsation, or rather a progression. As it progressed, the sound had the disturbing charm of the Fibonacci sequence, first one voice, then two, then three, then five, then eight and so on until it resounded, ecumenical,

with the power of all the voices in the Tunnel: — FORKS! FORKS! FORKS!

— What's this about the forks, boss? — asked one of the warriors in pyjamas.

— I have no idea... but I guess we'll find out soon enough.

Marco Antonio's warriors had the impression that the roar had become so powerful that it expanded and contracted the curved walls of the tunnel in time with its rhythm. The wings of the Psicopompo's sandals were crumpled, like ears that no longer wanted to hear anything; just before the warriors in pyjamas lost consciousness, the terrifying roar ceased abruptly.

— The good news, noble warriors in slippers — continued the voice coming from everywhere and nowhere, as if nothing had happened — is that most of the time, passing through the Chitin Forks does not mean losing your life, only remaining in a state of confusion for a while. The bad news is that those of you who don't lose consciousness will have to throw those who have fainted into the Isarco. Then throw yourselves into the river and swim to the Adige; or better still, to the Adriatic Sea. And don't look back. If you ever think you've got off lightly, next time you'll be food for the Sniffing Rats. Understood?

— And if we do not wish to suffer this ignominy? — An honourable attempt by Marco Antonio.

— You can be slaughtered with honour.

— Very good. Let's go for ignominy... but what if those who fainted don't regain consciousness in the river?

— They drown.

— It's quite a long way to the Adriatic Sea, can't we stop somewhere before we get there?

— No. You know the spells we can cast, right?

The sienna-coloured homunculus (Schwà) had shown himself to the villains by stepping forward onto a third-dimensional chitin platform to emphasise the threat. He looked a little worn out from the quantum effort, but his talking stick clawed at the air as if nothing had happened. This was perceived as a clear warning by the worried warriors. Meanwhile, Vic had also appeared in camouflage

shorts and a tank top. The tank top seemed to have the electrons of the outer atomic layer of the fabric in energetic flight, as if they were those of silicon hit by photons. Instead, it was a trivial breast containment problem. Although Vic did not look threatening at all and the little wings on her "psicopompo" sandals were once again erect, turgid and alert, caution prevailed among the troops. They all thought that perhaps another trap was hidden behind her desire.

— Very well, at the Forks! — The interstitial voice had interpreted the silence as consent.

The chitin forks were designed to instil fear, anxiety and sometimes terror. They were made of reinforced chitin and were halfway between Dionysus' ear and a labyrinth. In some ways, they also resembled snail shells, with their spiral structure in which the ratio between the coils evokes the golden ratio. The Forks were a permanent punitive structure (but only for non-reticulated individuals) located in a small square between the Topodromo and the assassins' mansio. Inside, the path was curved, seeming to wrap around itself, and then there were forks that sometimes led to dead ends. The path was so dark that the dim light of the tunnel was considered blinding. If and when you saw the light at the end of the tunnel, you had found the exit. The interstitial, however, were lying in wait, the only weapon allowed was a railway sleeper forged into a knobby club, and only one blow was allowed on the penitent leaving the tunnel, wherever it happened. Since the role of beater (beating the penitent with the club on selected parts of the body, including intimate parts) was fun and everyone wanted to participate, rules were established: the beaters must always be an odd number; the number (of beaters) must be proportional to the number of penitents; the beater could only volunteer every three sessions of penance; the one-hit rule could not be broken; if the penitent refused to pass under the chitinous forks, the one-hit rule could be broken. Simple and sporting rules, in short.

At the beginning of the ceremony, in front of the chitinous forks, Marco Antonio Psicopompo gave a short speech of encouragement in which he emphasised that a soldier's honour does not depend on the uniform he wears, but on the courage with which he faces adversity,

and that he, as deputy chief, would accompany them everywhere, even to the afterlife. With the excuse that he had to support all his men (one by one), he said that he would face the ordeal (the fork) last, because it was harder to wait a long time for pain than to end it quickly. Not very convinced, one by one, the men entered the forks as soon as the green LED lit up, like the slides in water parks before the implosion of Europe. Several green LEDs later, only two remained: Marco Antonio and a scrawny assassin with a hooked nose and a chin that looked like it was about to touch his nose.

— Don't you want to go first, boss?

— Soldier... are you afraid?

— Well... I don't know about you, but I do.

— Do you know the best way to overcome fear?

— Um... run away?

— Look at her face, you idiot!

— Ah, oh... if you could show me how to do it...

— Get in, or I'll kick your ass.

— You're so touchy, boss... don't get worked up... I'm going, I'm going.

As soon as the LED turned from red to green, Marco Antonio slipped into the Forks, taking with him a piece of reinforced chitin. The idea spread that somewhere in the Forks, people would receive a heavy blow from a knotty club. Judging it prudent to protect at least one of the two anatomical parts essential for living satisfactorily, he intended to use the piece of reinforced chitin to protect whichever one came his way. He would decide which one at the last second. With cautious anxiety, he had travelled what he believed to be almost the entire length of the fork until he glimpsed a light where he presumed the exit to be. The Psicopompo thought that perhaps by getting out quickly with an acrobatic dive he could avoid the ignominy of being beaten. Risking everything in one move, he somersaulted over the exit, landing on his back with the moulded chitin protecting his head. He didn't even have time to think: — Did I get away with it? — before he was struck in the testicles with the knotted club. It is a well-known fact that if something can go bad, it will go bad, so if Marco Antonio had protected his balls, he would

have been hit on the head. To his credit, at the moment of action, when conscious thought gives way to improvisation or whatever, he considered his head more important than his balls. Not everyone would have thought so.

Threat to Utica

— Look at this... — said Calipso, with her metamorphic question mark earrings dangling uncertainly.

Towards the middle of the chitin fork ceremony, about twenty assassins formed a small group of suffering people awaiting their fate in the square. At that moment, Draula had sent Stromboli to Vic and Schwà with a message that their presence was required at the Agency due to a possible serious and urgent problem. As soon as they arrived, they immediately stood in front of Marcello's monitor, where a video recorded by Stromboli and shared via entanglement with Draula was playing. The video arrived on the monitor using a non-quantum protocol developed by Draula and Marcello a few days earlier. Since information about everything that happened in the universe persisted in the cosmic database in the form of white noise, which was the same thing as gravitational waves, it was easy for a trinitarian organism to retrieve and reproduce it at will. The afternoon twilight entered through the open windows of the Agency's central office, causing the desk to emit cobalt reflections. Outside, there was a strange quiet because everyone was in the square of the forks enjoying the ceremony. Only the two Ottavias remained nearby because they were kind-hearted and testosterone-fuelled events did not appeal to them; besides, they could always pick up some last-minute orders.

— The small one is the slimy one, Flavio Anfiteatro, who's playing a double game, I'm sure. The other one, who looks like Dino Sala but isn't him, looks like one of the bad guys. Calipso said, looking from one to the other and waving her metamorphic earrings forged in the shape of a pulsating lightning bolt, Zeus yellow in colour. They

entered the Tunnel cautiously through the north door and immediately darted towards Utica.

— When did it happen?

— About two hours ago, they were already past the Brenner Pass... for sure.

— How did you notice? A curious Vic asked. Calipso turned to Draula, as if inviting her to speak.

— Talking with Marcello, — explained Draula the trine — we thought about strengthening security. In the sense that entanglement and everything else is good, but if it's a human being who looks and makes decisions, then mistakes can happen. So we created some subroutines for Stromboli that highlight all the important things we might have missed. Simple, isn't it?

— Fantastic — Flieg chimed in — in other words?'

— Stromboli had recorded these images, but we had missed them in the excitement of the moment. He reminded us to look at them because they might be important.

— Look at Stromboli, is he conscious or is it just a matter of subroutines?

— The issue is complicated — Tapis intervened. — There are two types of consciousness: the living and the silent. The silent type is characteristic of things: stones, knives, condoms and so on. In the case of Stromboli, the issue is complicated because it is a further aspect of Draula, and for this reason there is still no definition. Let's remember, however, that the most pressing issue is to understand what those two are up to. Assuming they are headed to Utica and not to Brenner for a cappuccino, what is so precious that it attracts them?

— The wallet seed — said Vic, who was beginning to suspect something. — I hid a backup in Wende's Pod.' Oh, poor Wende...

— But Assassins don't even know what a wallet is. Let alone use one. — Flieg, be pragmatic for once.

— There's the slimy one with him. And that one's got the wallet. — Calipso with earrings that emitted blue crackling discharges.

— Gosh... time could be a problem. If they get their hands on the seed, we could be in serious trouble.

— I'll go ahead, I feel responsible for the seed and for Wende — said Vic as he took off his flip-flops and put on tactical boots with neoprene soles, useful for running on the service tunnel's concrete floor without slipping. — Join me as soon as you can. Flieg, if you give me that pancake you're holding, I'll have 100% battery power. Draula, if you can send Stromboli to do a low-altitude reconnaissance, maybe I'll know what to expect. Tap, two or three determined people are enough to deal with the homunculus with the strange name and the barbarian with the blue face. But not you, you'd better stay here and see how this ends. Schwà, follow me as soon as you can, but I'm in a hurry and I won't wait for you. I love you, see you soon! — A few seconds later, he was already running fast through the service tunnel, with his long, muscular, magnificent legs.

No one was particularly surprised because if Vic could induce the electrons of the outer atoms of his tank top to make an energy leap, provided that the fabric (of the tank top) did not give way due to mammary exuberance, he could also take any situation in hand, and in a very sensible way. Schwà was a little low on energy; the spell had taken its toll, but despite this he set off, staggering, saying he would refresh himself from time to time with his brown cap. He was convinced that Vic would need him soon, so it was best to go. Tapis had run to find Dino Sala, surely one of the beaters at the ceremony at the Forks, to make him aware of the problem. He was almost certain that he would gladly exchange a few opinions with his antagonist. Flieg offered to act as Dino's guide and butler, if it would help save Vic's ass and theirs. Draula and Calipso maintained their positions as intelligence agents in the Agency. If only the warriors in pyjamas had a surge of pride (unlikely) and wanted to commit suicide with honour, instead of swimming towards the Adriatic Sea.

Tapis, Sweaty from running all the way down Trasimeno Avenue looking for Dino, with his multi-purpose jacket crumpled, he found him with the beverendo Birillo and the Grand Master of the Assassins in the little square of the chitinous forks. The Grand Master and the beverendo, softened by their cooperative victory, had for a moment put aside their disagreements. The beverendo was praising the

architectural wonders of the assassin's mansion and the Grand Master the prodigious Friday liturgy. Dino Sala was looking for an excuse to free himself from the softening frenzy and as soon as he saw Tapis, he apologised and headed towards him. Seeing that all his enemies, some more aware than others, were now on their way to the river, he listened carefully to Tapis. As soon as he grasped the situation, Dino Sala realised that if he wanted to save the blonde's ass (he still didn't know she wasn't human), he had to move fast, because he wanted to be back in time for the victory celebration. After all, he just had to run to Utica, sort out a couple of things and get back in time. To Tapis' disappointment, they rushed back to the Agency.

As soon as they arrived at the agency, Tapis threw himself breathlessly onto a chitin chair, claiming with a gasp that he was a contemplative man and not a man of action, like that one. Calipso asked him what he meant by "that one", and when he looked up, he realised that Dino Sala and Flieg were no longer there. They had already left for Utica and were probably running on the brown melmetta at that moment. Calipso, with his metamorphic earrings forged into tactical boots, had just managed to slip a couple of traveller's fitters into Flieg's backpack before the two disappeared.

— Did you see that brute's sandals? — Calipso said he saw the warrior's metamorphic wings on his sandals droop and then rise again.

True to his role as the silent conscience of the group, as well as Draula's third aspect, Stromboli had retrieved a second video from the cosmic database and proposed it to Calipso and Tapis; Draula already knew everything.

— No wonder, Cali — Tapis had caught his breath — they're metamorphic, like your earrings. This is possible because the swarm of specular material they're made of is sensitive to the magnetic field conveyed by the millivolts of nerve cells. If one is down, they collapse; if one is excited, they swell up. Simple. Swarms, as everyone knows, exhibit unpredictable emerging behaviours.

Calipso didn't remember ever telling her nerve cells how to influence her earrings, but she trusted Tapis's erudition.

No one in Utica paid any attention to strange life forms, and in any case Flavio Anfiteatro was well known and Dino Nora could be mistaken for a good assassin. So they sat there, as if nothing had happened, at the Termopolium del Corpo Sciolto, drinking beer and sipping tea. The late afternoon twilight enveloped the central bar in a lazy, leaden gloom, and they sat at a small table outside, as in the bars of yesteryear.

— Why are we sitting here wasting time, homunculus? You know patience is not my strong suit. Take me to the Holy Catino immediately, or would you prefer me to adjust the blade of my sword? — A clear allusion — I'm sure if you put it on this table, it would reflect the light from that hologram in a sinister way.

As the hologram of the day, Quinto Fabio Massimo had planned a wild boar chop sizzling on a bed of embers, red as a crowd of simonist priests; so red that they evoked unpleasant thoughts in Flavio. They had just arrived from Zama, Dino Nora was sweaty but the blue colour of his face was still intact. The secret agent, on the other hand, was more shaken than sweaty, having travelled in the warrior's backpack, while Dino's powerful quadriceps had carried them to Utica in what Flavio considered too short a time.

— Calm down, boss, everything is going according to plan.

— Oh, really? And what would that plan be, may I ask?

— Look across the central barrel. See that agency? Underneath the canary yellow hologram shaped like a lens floating in such a cute cyberspace? — The agent's synaptic connections were once again working overtime to come up with a credible follow-up to the miserable story he had invented in Zama. If he got out of that situation alive, he would change jobs. Something less eventful would be good.

— So?

— There, see that *mulier* coming out? You can't miss her, with those vertical striped Bermuda shorts that can't hide the shapely, symmetrical roundness of her buttocks. Not to mention the tank top that struggles to contain her good health. Need I point out that certain something about the way she moves? And what can I say....

— Stop it. So?

— So... without letting her notice, we follow her and she takes us to the Holy Catino, etc

Flavio Anfiteatro had invented an improbable story to save his ass and buy some time. This story had brought him to Utica, in front of the Exploratio propellente agency, which Olivia ran out of friendship for Draula while she and her other aspects were on a mission in the south. But since Olivia was also a friend of Vic's, she was now leaving the Agency to go and refill the nutrient hopper (at Vic's house) of Wende's hydroponic pod. She did this once a week. Flavio Anfiteatro, just before that once a week, had come up with another story so improbable that it seemed true. As if that weren't enough, Vic had hidden the paper backup of the seed in Wende's hydroponic pod, which was like saying: the Holy Catino.

— Get off your ass, you little man, and follow her. If I follow her, she'll notice me right away, but you'll go unnoticed. Don't lose sight of that ass, I'll follow close behind.

— With pleasure... boss.

Shortly thereafter, the sniffing mouse races would begin, and Quinto Fabio Massimo prepared to console the losers and congratulate the winners. In both cases, the approach was the same: a welcoming table and beer or Mikos, but only for those who could afford to pay. As always, the mushroom grappa had to be paid for in advance because its effects varied from person to person; if someone fainted, they could consume it, with caution, as soon as they regained consciousness. While Quinto Fabio Massimo arranged the tables of the Termopolium in the evening twilight, which only the interstitial recognised from the morning, etc., Flavio Anfiteatro followed Olivia, trying not to attract attention, himself followed by an undercover assassin. All around, interstitial life flowed peacefully. The hydroponic tanks bubbled as if nothing had happened, new spores were produced in the mushroom gardens and then scattered everywhere, and bioluminescent bacteria organised parties, unaware that humans were stealing the photons they produced to power photovoltaic panels made of melanin instead of silicon

The cavalry arrives

What the hell happened here? I know the dead guy, and that's the blonde who was in danger, and now she seems to have fainted. Who's the other one who looks more dead than alive? Do you know him?

— Yes, it's Wende. — Flieg replied between gasps, trying to catch his breath.

The rescue team (Dino Sala and Flieg) had just arrived at breakneck speed, though not running, from Zama. Flieg's braids, along with the rest of him, were soaked with sweat. The blue warrior was damp under his armpits. Flieg realised that he would have to take up regular exercise, just in case. Dino (Sala) was looking at Dino (Nora) lying on the floor, with a sword sticking out of his back and coming out of his chest more or less at heart level. He was dead beyond any doubt, lying in a pool of his own blood, as there were no other corpses to be seen. Wende was in a coma as usual, but he wasn't in his hydroponic pod. Vic seemed to have fainted; her eyes were open but she didn't respond to any stimuli.

— What's that behind her ear? — Dino Sala had found something curious while trying to see if Vic was hurt anywhere.

— A USB port... it's an Android. — Flieg explained, catching his breath.

— Look at the android!

— What did you say?

— No, nothing. You know what you have to do with her... him... I mean, with this thing?

— I have no idea, but I know someone who does. Would you mind helping me put Wende back in her Pod?

Flieg was convinced that Olivia had an idea of what could be done, and Olivia was convinced that Marcello Baleno knew how to help Vic. Olivia, who had just arrived, took charge of the situation while waiting for Marcello to join them (perhaps he had to finish a workout or make a protein shake). Partly because she was a woman and partly because she had come with her friend who was in love, she

had placed a chitin cushion under Vic's head. Immediately afterwards, she had checked Wende's Pod to make sure it was topped up with nutrients, just as she had left it less than two hours earlier. Her friend in love was called Minerva. She had a kind of cloud of black, curly hair that hung in suspension, unaffected by gravity, like on the International Space Station. She wasn't very tall and was rather thin but soft and supple. Her deep black eyes were the most striking feature of her pretty face, and she was always busy helping everyone, which made her likeable.

Dino Sala, seeing that there was no fight, had gone to the assassins' *mansio* to change his tank top, wanting to return to Zama as soon as possible for the three days of celebrations announced by Annibale Birillo. He said that for at least a couple of hours they would find him at the *mansio*, if necessary. Then Marcello Baleno arrived, having given up his evening training session, thus demonstrating his self-sacrifice. With professional demeanour and without comment, he plugged a USB cable into Vic's ear (port) and was monitoring the situation on a portable version of the monitor he had prepared for the Agency. Schwà arrived immediately afterwards with his humps so deflated that they looked like they were made of meta material, like Calipso's earrings and the wings of Marco Antonio Psicopompo's sandals. Despite this, he bent over Vic to see how he was, and then checked on Wende, ready to mobilise everyone in the vicinity to save his friends' asses; his thinking stick was loaded and ready. Tapis was the last to arrive, already aware of the gravity of the situation, but reassuring everyone that even the last of the assassins, in Zama, had taken the road to Isarco, Adige, etc. And that for at least a year they would no longer have that problem. As an aside, he said that he had found Flavio Anfiteatro crouched in the brown melmetta of the service tunnel and had convinced him to return to Utica by kicking him in the ass along the way. Now he was out there waiting for their considerations, tied up properly. Wende was as usual, neither good nor bad, but he was there, the others were all focused on Vic, or rather on Marcello Baleno, who was looking now at the monitor, now at Vic, without saying anything.

— Mm...

- Olivia, do you think mm is positive or negative?
- Shut up, Flieg, don't distract Marcello...
- Mm... mm...
- How should this be interpreted?
- Flieg!

The late afternoon twilight entering Vic's house caused Marcello's perfectly shaved and shiny skull to emit dramatic reflections. Not one of his sculpted muscles twitched, not one of the plastic veins that formed a bas-relief as precious as those of Mesopotamia on his body showed any sign of a heartbeat. The atmosphere was as thick as the sugary must of the Interstitial grape variety.

- I think we can try restoring to a point before Vic's collapse.
- Ah, like the computers of old?
- Yes, but only those with unstable operating systems — Marcello clarified. — There is one thing, though, friends. Something could go wrong, and Vic might not be the same anymore.

The comments murmured by everyone sounded like fruit flies trapped in sugary must. Even Minerva felt a pang of anguish, even though she only knew Vic by reputation. No one noticed the ripples in Wende's nutrient solution in the hopper, which shared their concern.

— However — continued Marcello — leaving her like this would be worse. Shall we proceed?

- There's no choice, is there? — Tapis spoke for everyone.

No more than three seconds had passed since Marcello pressed the reset button when Vic's unmistakable, melodious voice filled the room, diluting the thick atmosphere like fermentation transforming dense must into clear wine.

— Can I have something to drink, friends? Something strong, though...

Vic's story

Dino Sala joined the celebrations for ten minutes before leaving for the south with his freshly laundered tank top and bright blue

face. Like everyone else, he had been anxious about the blonde girl, who, although an android, had something about her. And like everyone else, he was glad that her ass was safe, because it was precious. Vic, as an android, didn't need to recover; either he worked or he didn't. At most, he had to recharge his batteries, which was what he was doing. Everyone was waiting for him to finish eating and drinking so they could hear from his full, well-formed lips what had happened. Taking advantage of the lunch break, Schwà had popped into the hydroponic greenhouse because he too needed to recharge with the exhausted circulating solution. Tapis, grateful that the dynamic interlude was now over, had regained his aplomb inside his multi-purpose jacket, like a bee in a honeycomb. Olivia and Minerva sat close together, holding hands, as if to emphasise the happy ending. Marcello, whose muscles were as toned and sculpted as if he were on a creatine overdose, was pleased with the good result. Flieg was Flieg and never tired of filling his friends' glasses with red wine, shaking his black braids as he did so. He had also poured half a glass of wine into Wende's funnel, convinced that it would do him good. Between one glass and another, Flieg had thought that sooner or later it would be nice to try to break through with Minerva. He was convinced that the vaporous cloud of her hair, insensitive to gravity, had a meaning to be discovered. But not now, now was Vic's moment.

Vic said she had rushed to her flat in the centre of Utica and hadn't even had time to clean the brown melmetta off her shapely calves when she sensed the presence of Flavio Anfiteatro and Dino Nora. 'What the fuck are you two assholes doing in my house?' she had thought of saying, but then settled on a more sober: "I would point out that you are rummaging through my house, assholes, and eating my pancakes. The result would have been the same anyway: Flavio Anfiteatro, given his compulsion for food, continued to eat Vic's pancakes (which Olivia had prepared and then forgotten), while Dino Nora continued to rummage around looking for the Holy Catino as if nothing had happened. The awkward situation lasted until Dino Nora began rummaging through Wende's pod, unceremoniously throwing out Vic's sleeping friend. At that point, Vic found herself

faced with the typical dilemma of all artificial intelligence: should she/could she hit Dino over the head with a frying pan and kick Flavio in the ass, or not? She certainly wanted to, but she couldn't bring herself to do it while Dino was turning the pod upside down. Then her memories stopped, and she picked up where she left off, with the glass of red wine.

— Enlightening... — said Tapis. — In my opinion, Vic, your circuits couldn't handle the frustration on one side and the indecision on the other. Even humans collapse in these cases, and you have to slap them around to reset them. For you, your friend Marcello was enough. I mean, the frustration of seeing your home and the pod mistreated and the indecision in taking action. So, poof!

— Hmm... that could be, but who killed the villain?

— Here, Marcello, this is a more complicated matter. Flieg, is there another bottle of wine in the cellar? It might help...

— I'll take care of it. Tap.

— I have an idea. — Minerva contributed to the discussion.

— Oh, go ahead and show it, dear. — Tapis, sure everyone agreed.

— Come on... — Olivia encouraged her with a nudge.

— It was love.

— Um... could you be more specific?

— I mean Wende, guided by love.

— You mean that thing that's like a disease, where everything's good while it's there, but when it goes away, you end up slapping each other and swearing? — Tapis summed up.

— Eh... I guess so, I'd say so. I mean, I only know from hearsay that Wende is crazy about Vic, but she doesn't know what to do other than take care of him, right? Even so, it's a beautiful demonstration of affection, because it's not easy for humans and machines to have something like that; it's already complicated enough between humans, isn't it? Besides, as we all know, Wende is in a kind of self-induced catatonic state so he doesn't have to face this impossible situation. Apparently, the catatonia isn't that deep, or at least not so deep that he can't perceive danger. So Wende, as an extreme act of love, has self-resurrected (?) from his catatonic state, approached Dino Nora and turned him into a corpse with his own

sword, thus eliminating the danger to Vic. He managed to do this because a human in a coma is not perceived as a danger by anyone, least of all by a blue warrior with those muscles. Then all three fell to the ground: Vic collapsed, Wende fell back into a catatonic state and the assassin lay as a corpse. We all saw the sword, even though it is no longer there because Dino Sala took it as a souvenir.

All this was said in one breath by Minerva, who seemed to know a lot about matters of the heart.

— Well, given the circumstances, it's as good an explanation as any. Plus, it's romantic.

— Tapis is right, I would suggest adopting it until a better one comes along.

— Well said, Flieg. If there's nothing else, I suggest we move on to the celebrations, so maybe I'll find time to train a little later. — Said Marcello Baleno.

— Wait a minute, friends — Vic, the revived one — Wende protected this too — showing everyone the backup sheet with the twelve words of the Singularity wallet seed; in other words, the Holy Catino. — If Dino Nora and Flavio Anfiteatro, who is still out there tied up as he should be, waiting for punishment, had found it and disappeared, the Singularity would have returned after two hundred years.

— Unacceptable! We must find an appropriate punishment for the despicable Amphitheatre, we all agree on that.

— I have an idea... — suggested Flieg. — Let's all go to the Termopolium to eat and drink, Flavio Anfiteatro will pay, but he won't eat or drink anything; he'll just watch. Then he'll be thrown out by Utica in disgrace and without a bitcoin to his name.

— Considering Flavio Anfiteatro's appetite, as well as his attachment to bitcoins, I would say that this punishment borders on cruelty. — Tapis commented.

— That's right, Tap... that's right. — Vic confirmed. — Everyone to Quinto Fabio Massimo!

Cap. 9 – The Symbiont

When the first corpses of the aristeriti arrived in the Adriatic (and the mullet were amazed at the unusual abundance of food that day), the splendour of Zama was bathed in the twilight of the first day after the celebrations for the victory at the horns of Hatting. It was obvious that the first to arrive were the corpses, they did not need to rest during the journey because they were prepared for eternal rest. Those who had only fainted and set out to swim, on the other hand, needed rest, but they too would arrive.

Even in the dim light of the Tunnel, the third dimension seemed to glow with a life of its own. The celebrations had lasted three days, ending when the reserves of beer and mushroom grappa ran out. The interstitial swarm, which had rushed to the scene at the moment of danger, dispersed with pats on the back and promises to meet again at the next battle, or ambush. The battle of Trasimeno would remain in the collective memory as unsurpassed, at least for the time being. Even the third dimension remained, confirming how well deserved the name that the most famous city in the Tunnel had earned: Zama the splendid.

The tunnel company had decided to move to Zama because they were all fascinated by the Mediterranean climate, which was stronger between the two Ottavie and Comida da Furia Tranquilla. They were also fascinated by the sweetness of the accent, which was harsher in the north. They had decided without putting it to a vote, to see if there was a majority that could arrogate to itself the right to impose its decisions on a minority, because these things

belonged to an unpleasant past, when democracy existed (?). Now decisions were made in a reticulated manner, where everyone won because it was a non-zero-sum game and authority was distributed. Regardless of this, Tapis and Draula, with its additional aspects, had decided to settle in the subsidiary agency, which had rooms and comforts for all of them. Tapis found it convenient to be close to the Pastafarian Church because of his business dealings with Annibale Birillo, while Draula thought it useful to have a tunnel exit nearby to keep an eye on the situation, with exploratory flights to Stromboli being the best option. Etna was happy wherever she was, as long as she had fresh dew hydroponic lettuce and a coloured plastic ashtray to lounge around on. In reality, Draula didn't have a problem with accommodation because she could always transform herself into a wave and thus be here, there or elsewhere, then rematerialise in the morning for breakfast. But she thought it was nice to adapt to the customs of her Earth friends (she was from Trantor).

The mother agency, Exploratio Propellente of Utica, was entrusted to Olivia and Minerva, who had decided not to move to Zama because Olivia had promised Minerva that she would love her forever in Utica. Consequently, they thought it would be bad luck to move, because they still loved each other with an exclusive and tender love in that city. The two knew very well that love did not end for geographical reasons but because of exhaustion, so why tempt fate (a common cliché). Marcello Baleno was so immersed in his "vigoressia" that he probably didn't even remember having had a relationship with Calipso. Tapis suspected that Marcello had a satisfying relationship with his biceps, triceps and so on, which is not wrong. The only relationship that can stand the test of time is the one with oneself, as long as one loves oneself. Vic, Schwà and Wende had found accommodation near an old Zama hydroponic greenhouse, at ground level of the Tunnel. Schwà found it comforting to have the flow of the greenhouse's waste water nearby (he always had a snack around midnight), Vic found the hydroponic bubbling, which resembled white noise, relaxing, and for Wende it was the same given his catatonic state. Wende had travelled from Utica to Zama on the Trapois, which was actually a travois (the one

used by the Native Americans exterminated by the notorious exporters of democracy) with two chitin wheels and renamed Trapois in honour of Tapis, who had created it. They had settled in a small loft between the Comida of Furia Tranquilla and the greenhouse. With a couple of chitin screens, they had created a space for Wende's pod and a small room for Vic, while Schwà slept wherever he could. Calipso and Flieg, on the other hand, had occupied an attic in the third dimension, one of those left vacant by the swarm. Apart from the pipes that gave the room its dystopian warmth, the centrepiece of the décor was the ventilation fan. It hung right in the middle of the living room (where the chandelier used to be) and, in addition to preventing moisture from stagnating by moving the air, the LEDs on the control panel, with their soft red and white flashing light, helped to create an alcove effect. Here and there, Calipso had placed mushroom decorations, among which the Amanita muscaria stood out, matching the red and white LEDs of the ventilation fan. The loft (just like those in New York in the old days) had large windows, through which the dim light of the Tunnel entered, and a small terrace overlooking the Trasimeno avenue. A spiral staircase made of satin-finish chitin (Calipso thought the opacity was cool) led to the avenue. So in the morning they could decide whether to have breakfast at Furia Tranquilla or take a short walk and have a cappuccino and croissants at the two Ottavie. Given the degree of intimacy between the two, they had decided that the only room with secure access (a door) should be the bathroom, for obvious reasons. Their intimacy could not have been greater, as they willingly exchanged bodily fluids whenever they could, which was often. They had then distributed the rugs, cushions and other items creatively around the room, leaving a free space in the centre, under the ventilation fan, which they considered their alcove, just a stone's throw from the romantic terrace overlooking the avenue.

Lichen

— What did you two find? — Asked Flieg, turning to Vic and Schwà, as he tried to catch the crumbs from the cream-filled cannoli he was eating before they fell onto his blue striped Bermuda shorts.

Like the hoplites in Sparta, the friends of the Tunnel Company often got together to cement their esprit de corps. The hoplites ate and slept together, while the team members discussed high matters or interstitial commerce. The nature of the topics discussed at the meetings, as well as Calipso's hairstyle, spoke volumes about the normality that had been restored. The Oriental's hair was wrapped in spirals to form a truncated cone, while his metamorphic earrings were forged in the shape of a hammock made of woven rope, with every detail visible. Everyone wore more elegant flip-flops than tactical boots, as they were more in keeping with the nature of the meeting. Flieg's Bermuda shorts were full of cream cannoli crumbs (the latest creation of the two Ottavias) and her pigtails were the same as always. Calipso's and Vic's tank tops were overflowing as usual because their breasts were pressing against the fabric until it was about to tear. Draula's fashion trend was drifting towards hymenoptera: a yellow outfit (shorts and tank top) with black polka dots made her look like a wasp; her blue hair with negative geotropism restored normality. Schwà and Tapis were a comforting sight, always the same: Schwà leaning on his stick and Tapis imperturbable in his multi-purpose jacket.

— A symbiote. And we found it in the third ventilation shaft in Zama, the one just after the Comida but before the Topodromo.

— Oh, really? And what was the... did you say symbiote?

— Yes indeed, his name is Lucifer, and it seems he wants to communicate with humans.

— Sorry?

— Yes, Lucifer... while we were looking for something useful for our latest project, we noticed an unusual glow in the ventilation shaft. We went in and saw it — Vic reported.

— And he said to you: 'Pleased to meet you, I'm Lucifer. Who are you two?'

— Flieg, try not to be yourself, let Vic talk... — Calipso nudged him.

— Come on, Flieg... — said Vic patiently, you know very well that

lichens don't communicate (when they do) with words.

— Is Lucifer a lichen?

Vic and Swhattsy explained that, at least at first glance, Lucifer looked like the classic symbiosis between a fungus and algae, in short, a lichen, except that the fungus was bioluminescent. The algae, on the other hand, did not seem so different from normal photosynthetic bacteria, but perhaps they were. If it had a relationship with that fungus, the algae must also be particular. In any case, Lucifer seemed happy with the encounter. They also said that they had invented the name Lucifer because it seemed appropriate, given that the symbiont seemed to communicate with light signals. They felt sure that it intended to communicate because only the section of Lucifer in front of them emitted the signals, modulating the activity of the fungal photophores (?). If they moved along his body, the light emanation followed them. All other parts of Lucifer's body were illuminated differently, i.e. more softly and continuously. They also explained that Lucifer was spread out, for about a metre, on the surface of the ventilation shaft, and that they had not understood a thing he meant, apart from the fact that he wanted to communicate.

— Ah, a good example of adaptation to the environment, a bioluminescent fungus and photosynthetic algae in the Tunnel. The mycelium breaks through the concrete and stretches out in search of mineral salts and who knows what else, while the algae provides organic food with photons. Life always finds a way! Who said that? Oh, never mind. I would find the presence of intelligence strange, but... Drauli, can Etna help us see if there has ever been anything like this anywhere else? In the universe, I mean.

— As soon as she wakes up from her nap, I'll ask her to do some research in the universal database. It's really exciting work, maybe we should set up a crisis unit to look into it further, what do you think?

Since no one had any objections, the crisis unit became a reality in a nanosecond. Quite a difference from the days when bureaucracy existed. And since the day was still long, they got back to work. The perception of the length of the day was a prerogative of the

interstitials; everyone else would always perceive only twilight, albeit with cobalt flashes. Draula and her other aspects, together with Vic and Schwà, would inspect the ventilation duct to try to establish closer contact with Lucifer. Cali and Flieg would explore other ducts to see if there were any other Lucifer elsewhere. Tapis would contact Marcello Baleno to hear his opinion on the matter. They would meet as soon as possible at the Agency to take stock of the situation, but also to eat and drink.

Lucifer

— Look, Vic, look... it's giving off round lights... right in front of our noses — said Draula with the enthusiasm of a teenager.

The mini antennas protruding from the bionic chips under Draula's ears were in close contact (Bluetooth?) with Etna's tail, which was so vertical that it looked radioactive. The dwarf turtle was searching the cosmic database through her colleagues scattered throughout the universe for something similar to Lucifer, even though he seemed to be lazing around in his yellow ashtray. Draula, given the hymenopteran look of her clothes, hopping here and there and bending over to better observe Lucifer's glyphs, resembled a bee around a honeycomb. The electric blue of his hair, which seemed to be projected towards infinity, matched Lucifer's colour, at least the cyanobacterial part of the symbiont, which resembled the algal bloom of the northern Adriatic before the implosion. Vic and Schwà observed the symbiont in their own way, more interested in the semantics than in the display of glyphs: circular, luminous and persistent (a hologram, in short). Lucifer, for his part, did not show any signs of excitement; his communication seemed to follow a logical and calm pattern. The symbiont clung to the curved wall of the duct and could be observed in good detail. The colour varied from off-white to cobalt blue, and was not uniform but patchy. The luminous glyphs seemed to emanate from the whitish areas by means of photophores (or modulations of the mycelium). Even in the cobalt-coloured parts, where the algae prevailed, there were

photophores because when Draula and the others moved to get a better look, the glyphs followed them. But Lucifer seemed happier if they stopped where the photophores were denser.

— Are you recording everything, Drauli?

— Down to the last pixel, Vic.

— What do you think, Schwà?

— It's comforting to discover that I'm not the most unlikely being in the Tunnel — said Schwà with his typical Texan accent, as if he had a stone in his mouth. — Have you noticed that there seems to be a pattern in the circular circles of light?

— Yes, it seems like he's telling us that most of the work is done. The rest is just a matter of time, and one day we'll understand each other too.

— We're sure of it — said Draula with conviction, modulating the syllables (short and long) of the plural trinitatis.

Every now and then he spoke in the plural, which made sense given that he was referring to his other aspects: Etna, with whom he was in constant communication via bionic chips, and Stromboli, ottimo massimo, who was perched on a portable stand just outside the ventilation duct, observing and recording everything. In the past, a similar form of plural (popes and kings) was used when contact with reality was lost.

As soon as they realised that the circular communication patterns were repeating themselves *ad libitum*, they decided to give the lichen a breather. They tried to make it understand that they would return tomorrow or as soon as they had news. They were convinced that stealing photons from their canonical use (carbon organisation) must be costly for Lucifer, but they thought that their new friend considered it an investment.

— So, guys, are there other Luciferi?

— Luciferi, Tap?

— Yes, Lucifer in the plural. How would you say Flieg?

— Well... I would say there is another Lucifer? Or even more than one?

— OK. So, guys, is there another Lucifer? Or even more than one?

— Very funny... really — commented Calipso, wearing her metamorphic earrings shaped like the onomatopoeia for snoring (saw?).

They had met at the agency half an hour earlier, but since it was late and everyone was hungry, the decision to hold the meeting at the due Ottavie seemed logical to everyone. After the superb (?) victory at the horns of Hatting, life had returned to normal in beautiful Zama. And that was good for everyone. The sniffer rat races had resumed with their usual regularity, the interstitials were betting, the rats were having fun and Furia Tranquilla was doing good business, consoling the losers and congratulating the winners. The chitin shapers had reopened their shops and were producing plates, boards, nails, screws and anything else that could be adapted to the tubular reality of the tunnel. The mushroom growers had given new life to the interstitial gardens (the *hortus conclusus* of yesteryear), which produced unknown delicacies. The hydroponic greenhouses bubbled steadily, extracting minerals from the circulating solution and enriching it in return with ignoble catabolites (Schwà's diet), while creating works of art such as the Interstitial grape variety. They had set the table in a corner near the fake Etruscan arch at the entrance. Stromboli, who had already received his ration of amperes, stood on his portable perch just outside. Draula, Vic and Schwà, the members of the crisis unit, sat close to Calipso, who was showing off earrings forged in the shape of shiny cutlery (hunger). Flieg sat next to Calipso, ready to put his hand on her shapely thigh just in case. Tapis glowed in his jacket, like a flame in the liquid wax hollow. The dim light enveloped everything amniotically: living consciousnesses, silent consciousnesses, and who knows what else.

— It seems there are no other Luciferi, Tap. — Calipso, remaining on the philological theme — at least not in the ventilation ducts that Flieg and I explored. Although, to tell the truth, there are some strange little lights here and there that could be reminiscent of Lucifer, but they're not so social.

— What do you mean, Cali?

— That they do not emit luminous, circular, jagged glyphs, Tap.

— I understand.

The two Ottavias wore their company uniforms to satisfy the evening customers. The maggiore was working in the kitchen while the minore, with a triple vertical chignon at the nape of her neck and a combat stick slung over her shoulder, served new delicacies and well-known specialities at the tables: victory fritters, soups made from *Amanita muscaria* mitigated, etc. She wore black tactical boots with neoprene soles that allowed her to move nimbly between the tables. Since it was late in the evening (although no one could prove it without resorting to theoretical physics or magic), the post office was filling up with hungry people.

— Marcello says that with Mikos's next caravan arriving, he can send us a two-way translator.

— Two-way tap?

— Yes, it translates from glyphs to human language and from human language to glyphs.

Meanwhile, Ottavia minore had brought a soup of porcini mushrooms in a hydroponic tomato sauce and a bottle of *Interstiziale*, the red wine from the Tunnel. Then she ran off lightly, zigzagging between tables and lamps made of bioluminescent bacteria resting on fake Doric half-columns.

— We sent Marcello the reference to the glyphs we found in the cosmic database and the video you made of Lucifer. Ten minutes later, he said that the translator was easier to do than to say. Then he did it and sent it, it should arrive shortly. — Tapis clarified.

Draula had dressed in the hymenoptera style but with stripes instead of dots. She thought it was more elegant and suitable for the evening. As usual, her hair reassured everyone that she was the little trine and not a wasp; she ate with appetite nonetheless. Vic and Calipso also ate with appetite, putting the elasticity of their tank tops to the test. Tapis sipped a broth of hydroponic vegetables and *Schwà*, out of politeness, sucked from a sealed thermos a solution full of various catabolites. He politely tried not to show his disgust for the good things that humans liked. Flieg was attacking the tray of victory fritters that Ottavia had brought in the meantime.

— They were called heptapods and used a language similar to

Lucifer's — explained Draula, using the plural trinitatis as he bit into a pancake. — We're not quite sure if they saw them on this planet or another, but they were definitely in this universe.

— The world is changing, isn't it, Tap? First intelligent lichen, then heptapods...

— Let's hear what Drauli has to say, Flieg.

— No one knows who they are or where they came from. After introducing themselves, they began chatting with humans using their glyphs, which were similar to Lucifer's. After a while, they understood each other and someone wrote a manual on how to communicate. Since we found the manual in the imperial library of Trantor, which I didn't even remember existed, we downloaded it and passed it on to Marcello.

— Ah, good, so it's just a matter of time before we understand Lucifer.

— That's right, Vic. Shall we have another round of victory fritters while we wait? — Flieg always focused on the task.

— I'm with you, Flieg, that was... slurp... the last one.

Dialogue between a lichen and the *triumfeminae*

— Look, girls... it works, it works! — Draula exclaimed enthusiastically in Lucifer's duct as he tested the *interpretes*.

The night before, at the Ottavias', they had discussed at length, after the third round of victory fritters, who should go and talk to Lucifer. By the time the fritters were finished, they had all agreed that it would be better if the girls conducted the negotiations. Partly because females are more patient than males and partly because they are more willing to understand others; Draula, Vic and Calipso were chosen. Since they were there, they were christened the *triumfeminae* a charming neologism coined (by Tapis the philologist, to tell the truth): *triumfeminato*. As far as anyone knew, it was the first of its kind in history. Although, to tell the truth, it was a bit atypical because only Calipso was human (female) in the strict sense

of the word. Vic was an android, albeit with a more human appearance than a normal human, while Draula was an alien teenager with additional aspects.

These additional aspects (the fact that it was one and triune) had intrigued an interstitial, who was sitting alone at a nearby table and had been listening to the discussion. He said his name was Ario and approached them, offering a bottle of wine in exchange for their opinion on the matter. Since no one would dream of refusing a free round of wine, Ario sat down between Flieg and Tapis. He was a guy with a long grey beard, a hooked nose, disconcerting eyes and supernatural eyebrows. He slowly adjusted his interstitial tunic over his white, hairy legs, making him look like a monk who had lost his flock. He wore a chitin cap decorated with geometric designs on his head, and between glasses of wine he argued that it could not be a true triumphfeminato because of Draula's trine nature. It was not known, in fact, whether there were three or four or even five females, due to Draula's additional aspects. The question could have been resolved with a certain nonchalance by speaking of *quinquemfeminae* rather than *triumfeminae*, but nothing was that simple; there was more to it. The question of non-consubstantiality arose. Everything suggested, Arius continued with a certain gravity, that Draula's nature was different from that of his additional aspects. Of course, one had to accept that the Trinity was complete and perfect, but nevertheless the different nature of the individual members of the Trinity could not be ruled out, if only for the sake of philosophical truth. He was about to add further profound considerations on the subject when, taking advantage of the fact that the bottle was empty, Tapis took their leave, thanking him for his valuable opinion. Everyone realised that if Arius had realised that Vic was an android, they would never have got rid of him; they also thought that the question as he had posed it was a little Byzantine, perhaps esoteric. He then sat down again at his table with a disconsolate and increasingly unemployed air. The next day, or at the latest as soon as the *interpretes* arrived, as they had immediately christened Marcello Baleno's device, the *triumfeminae* (they liked the neologism) would go and talk to Lucifer. And no one bothered about

the consubstantiality of Draula's aspects anymore.

— Do you see what I see, Cali?

— For all the overcooked pasta in the universe, I see it, Vic...

Calipso had borrowed some Pastafarian interjections from Flieg, as well as wearing earrings shaped like notepads. The *triumfeminae* were in Lucifer's ventilation duct. Draula was excited and held the *interpre* solemnly in front of Lucifer's luminous glyphs. The device created by Marcello Baleno looked like a tablet but worked like a walkie-talkie. Basically, they had to say: it's my turn or it's your turn. Not knowing how to start, the girls decided to begin with something tried and tested.

— Hello Lucifer. — Draula had written. And after a moment's hesitation, Lichene replied — health and prosperity to you all... it was about time you noticed me. Who is Lucifer?

— Well, that would be the name we gave you...

— How nice... it sounds good, even if when I think of myself I think of "bursting light" or "the terror of darkness", but also "he who conquers darkness", but you can call me Lucifer; really, I like it.

— Ah, thank you, you're very kind. — Draula wrote, looking at the others as if asking for suggestions on what to say next.

— Ask him how he is — suggested Calipso.

— How have you been latest days, my dear friend?

— Days?

— Yes, days, hours, weeks.

— Hours? Weeks?

The *triumfeminae* had learned that Lucifer's concept of time was different from that of humans, or even alien. There were no glyphs to describe days, let alone hours, minutes and seconds, let alone weeks and months. For him, there was only now, a little while ago and a little while from now. Now belonged to what was manifest, concrete, tangible. The past (a little while ago) and the future (in a little while) belonged instead to the realm of ideas, dreams and everything (absolutely everything) that was not manifest, in short, everything that was abstract. Just as they had understood that he perceived himself as an individual even if diffuse (?). All three girls

were unsure about the perceived diffusion of himself. Marcello's software worked well but left room for interpretation, and every now and then there was a "minority report" (?) which meant that the matter remained suspended until the *triumfeminae* reached complete agreement. They had also realised that communication via luminous glyphs involved a certain (considerable) energy consumption for Lucifer. They noticed this because the outlines of the glyphs became increasingly jagged as they spoke, as if he were short of breath. Partly for this reason and partly to see if they could resolve the uncertainty issue, they decided to return to the Agency to discuss it with the others. This would allow Lucifer to rest a little. They did not tell him that they would be back tomorrow, but that they would return shortly. This was in full accordance with their new friend's perception of time.

— This glyph, — they were examining the video made by the girls after an upgrade to the translator — according to Marcello's *interpre* 2.0, can mean: Lucifer, victor over darkness, is happy to talk to humans. Eighty per cent chance that this is the meaning.

— Marcello is a great Tap, he added the probability percentage to the translation.

— That's right, Flieg, that's right...

— Here, this other one means diffusion or widespread. And the probability that it refers to itself or to something else is fifty per cent.

According to the perception of interstitial time, it was late afternoon, according to Lucifer it was a little after they had spoken. In any case, it was not yet dinner time, at most it could be considered a late snack or an early happy hour. The two Ottavias had brought appetisers and sparkling white wine to the agency. The white wine was a novelty from the south, which surprised the tunnel crew with how perfectly it paired with the appetisers. A moderate dose of ethyl alcohol (prosecco), in addition to delighting the palate, can stimulate understanding of the world, in this case of the glyphs that his friends were looking at on Marcello's monitor. He realised immediately that one could only speak of probabilities regarding the accuracy of the translation, and without waiting for anyone to point

it out, he wrote the patch for the software and sent it to Tapis. All this between his morning and evening workouts, but after his fifth protein meal of the day. He certainly couldn't neglect the rounded shape of his muscles if he wanted them to always be close to the golden ratio.

— My opinion — said Calipso, who wore question mark earrings and had her hair tied up in three vertical buns (a tribute to the two Ottavias) — is that if Lucifer had wanted to say that he perceives himself as diffuse, he would have included the concept in the glyph that refers to him. Assuming that there is a glyph that expresses such a thing.

— I feel the same way — agreed Vic, who had already polished off his share of the appetisers, turning them into a steady stream to recharge his batteries, and his tank top — but I have no idea what it refers to.

— Mm, it could be that he is referring to himself, but not so directly. It comes to mind because the two glyphs are close together.

— It could be Flieg... mm... — Tapis pondered.

— Couldn't it be that he wants us to spread it? — suggested Schwà with an accent reminiscent of Texans, even though he came from the former Swiss Confederation.

— You're a genius — said Tapis, illuminated by the idea as he raised his glass of prosecco.

— Um... would you mind turning the light on for us too, Tap? What do you mean, spread out? — Asked Calipso.

— Lucifer is asking us for help to spread himself throughout time and space.

Tapis argued that since Schwà was the life form closest to lichen, he must have been the one who correctly intuited the meaning of the mysterious glyph. Lichens, Tapis explained, are interested, like all living things, in propagating themselves in time and space. But, he continued, they have a growth rate that is measured in millimetres per year.

— Ah, like Vic's boobs. Except that they take ten minutes at most to swell up after she eats.

— Flieg, is it possible that you are always so true to yourself? —

Said Calipso, whose earrings had taken the form of an emoticon (a frowning face).

— Lucifer — continued Tapis, ignoring Flieg's comment — must have thought that with a little help he could speed up the process. Since he is not human, we can assume, until proven otherwise, that his intentions are peaceful.

— What do you mean?

— If such a proposal were made by a human, you could be almost certain of trouble, such as invasion, contamination with chemical or radioactive agents, enslavement, etc. Coming from Lucifer, it can be considered. Perhaps we should check with him to see if this is a correct interpretation.

— So tomorrow (soon) the three of us have to go back to him and ask him if it's true that he wants us to spread it, is that good?

— You're right, Drauli. Maybe you should also ask him how he intends to spread itself in the word. — Tapis pointed out.

— All this chatter has made me hungry, guys... shall we go to Ottavie?

— Deal done, Flieg — agreed Vic, hungry as always.

The next day, in the ventilation duct where the leaden twilight was enlivened by the glyphs of lichens, they realised that Lucifer could see them well. As soon as the lichen realised that the humans had grasped the concept of its diffusion, it emitted a glyph in the shape of a smiling emoticon. Perhaps his communicative consciousness of the third kind, after living and silent, had subsequently supported Tapis, copying a few smiles, perhaps human, alien or android, who could know? In any case, the result was an emoticon with a clear meaning that did not need an *interpretes* and was useful for communication. The glyphs were always circular but increasingly jagged, even if clear. The triumfeminae had only a vague idea of what Lucifer wanted to communicate, because the probability of translation always fluctuated between fifty and sixty per cent. They were almost sure that Lucifer had talked about two things: how he wanted to be spread and that he could give something in return; as in any self-respecting (mutualistic) symbiosis, even if in this case it

would have been a “ménage à trois”. They were almost sure because at one point Lucifer had secreted a handful of dark red berries and offered them to the *triumfeminae*. He had done so with a sequence of actions that evoked something erotic, like a heterosexual boy taking off a girl's bra, or a heterosexual girl unbuttoning a boy's fly, but also all the respective homosexual variations, etc. Regardless of this particular detail, they had recorded all the conversations to study them together with the others. After this interview, Lucifer declared himself exhausted, so the girls returned to the Agency, walking through the tunnel that the third dimension had created along the Trasimeno avenue.

There were few interstitials around because it was almost lunchtime. They had stopped by Furia Tranquilla to buy tigelle and condiments to eat quickly in the office before the collective reflection on the morning's recordings. Upon their arrival at the Agency, they were greeted by the verses of Stromboli, who was perched just outside the entrance on his portable perch. The animaloid had been showing new habits for some time that could be described as parrot-like. Everyone thought it was a new emerging behaviour of the neural swarm delimited by the small ornithomorphic skull; almost certainly due to the human, alien and android stimuli it had been subjected to since moving from Trantor, Draula was not at all worried. When acting as *triumfemina*, she entrusted its additional aspects to the care of Tapis, who knew good what to do. She had bought a hydroponic lettuce leaf for Etna, who was surely still sleeping in her ashtray on the table. Flieg had just opened a bottle of Interstitial, because even if they were having a quick snack of tigelle, they couldn't drink water.

- Do you think Lucifer could also make cappuccino?
- Flieg, stop it.
- Oki Cali.

The best proof that Lucifer's berries (which they had kept for dessert) were edible was the disgust Schwà felt when he looked at them. Everyone had tasted them and found them tasty and perhaps nutritious, even if their appearance was what it was: they were somewhere between an arbutus and a coronavirus. In the sense that

even an arbutus has many (many) protuberances that make it pretty as well as edible, the pact berry (as it was immediately christened) has fewer (many fewer) and they look like lots of spike proteins stuck in the viral pericapsid; however, the taste was strawberry and the colour was that of arbutus. They had christened them “pact berries”, attributing to them a propitiatory meaning about the agreement between humans, androids, aliens and Lucifer. The friends were trying to piece together the meaning of the glyphs and the information that the triumpheminae had brought. The glyphs appeared clear on Marcello's monitor in the Agency's central office, but their meaning was not so clear, at least not at that moment.

— Apart from the first ones, which are conventional: Lucifer blah blah is happy, etc., which we already know, the others are new and the probability is only sixty per cent. — Tapis pondered.

— They look like two sets of glyphs, with an additional glyph at the end that should give meaning to the previous ones. — Calipso, always attentive, had observed them since their creation.

— So we have descriptive glyphs plus a semantic glyph. Very interesting...

— I foresee hard work, — Flieg always the same — appetisers and prosecco?

— Perfect!

With the help of sparkling white wine and Marcello's *interpretes*, towards the end of the appetisers that Ottavia Minore had brought for a snack, dressed in civilian clothes because she was not yet on duty, they had put together two descriptive lists with corresponding semantic glyphs at the end. Flieg had noticed that Ottavia Minor looked good in her plain clothes: coloured Bermuda shorts, a tank top and flip-flops.

— So, the first series seems to have two semantic glyphs rather than one.

— Two taps?

— That's how it seems, Cali.

— And what does the descriptive part say?

— It looks like a list of random things, such as stones, soil, rocks, and so on..

— Mm... and the two semantic glyphs? — Vic the curious.

— Here lies the difficulty. The first refers to itself, that is, to Lucifer, together with something that means: to cut, to separate, and something else that seems to mean: to expel, to emit, to propose again. We already know the second semantic glyph, which means to spread.

— Easy, guys, Lucifer will shit out pieces of himself, which we'll then have to tidy up a bit, however we can and wherever we can, as long as there's soil, rocks, etc.

— Prosecco inspires you, eh, Flieg? If we replace "shit" with "expel", I think we're there. Shall we move on to the second part?

— Of course, Cali, if we all agree with Flieg's refined interpretation — suggested Tapis.

Since no one had anything to say, they moved on to the second set of glyphs. Again, the descriptive part was a list of things that seemed more edible than anything else, such as berries, tubers and roots, but also more elaborate things like proteins, vitamins, etc. The only semantic glyph was something to do with production, cultivation and donation. Everyone more or less grasped the concept, but then they turned to Schwà because he was the expert on unlikely foods, as well as the life form closest to Lucifer.

— It seems that in exchange for the favour of propagation, Lucifer can produce all the things listed for us — said Schwà with his rolling pronunciation. Given the complicated delicacy of your organism, I would suggest asking him to produce vegetable things, which are more digestible and less toxic than cultivated meat (?).

— I told you that with a little training he could even make cappuccinos and croissants..

— Flieg...

— Ask Schwà Cal if you don't believe me. He can shit gold bars, even if they're small and spherical. And there's not much difference between him and Lucifer.

After a hard day's work crowned with success, the choice for dinner was between the two Ottavias or Furia Tranquilla. For once, they chose La Comida because Ario didn't go there and the

scoundrel Flavio Anfiteatro wouldn't be seen for a while. Draula preferred to stay at the agency because Etna and Stromboli were exhausted from the intense day. Draula's separation from his additional aspects was energy-consuming and, a bit like humans in the first ten minutes of love, they parted reluctantly; during the separation, the energy consumption for the entanglement and everything else was high, so when they found each other again, they put on their pyjamas and slept until the next day. For some mysterious reason (perhaps it was cool on Trantor), Draula's pyjamas often matched her daytime clothing. She had slipped into camouflage pyjamas because she had chosen matching clothing for the mission, with elaborate patterns reminiscent of an African rainforest. Schwà needed some ignoble catabolites to recharge and was going to pop into the hydroponic greenhouse. She would join them at Furia Tranquilla when they arrived at the café.

Furia Tranquilla looked aerodynamic that evening, even though she wasn't exactly thin. Perhaps it was the way the dim light illuminated her aquiline nose and shaven head, or perhaps it was the aged chitin tunic that emphasised her shapely legs, arms and calves. No one could say for sure whether it was fat or muscle, but in their uncertainty, they were all nice to her. Hungry, they had brought a mountain of tigelle to the scales, and their wallets had been lightened by a small cascade of bitcoins. The semi-darkness found unusual ways to reflect off Furia's abundant piercings. The ring she wore in her nose reflected darkness, the series of rings in her ears emitted dull flashes that struck the eyelids, and every time she collected bitcoins and smiled gratefully, she showed an elaborate design made of metal wire on her teeth, which emitted adamantite glints. By the end of the tigelle, they had also run out of topics and comments about their new lichen friend, and since Schwà had not yet shown up, perhaps he had dozed off in the hydroponic greenhouse, they went home with the intention of sleeping, as the next day would be just as heavy.

- Flieg?
- Tell me, Cali.

Calipso and Tapis' legs dangled from the balcony of their penthouse in the Third Dimension. They weren't wearing flip-flops to prevent their plastic slippers from falling on the heads of the reticulars walking below them along the Trasimeno avenue. The year before, Vic and Schwà had perfected a 3D printer that filtered the air, captured micro-fragments of coloured plastic and condensed them into small ingots. The ingots were then used to print objects: cutlery, cups, flip-flops. An excellent example of technology with positive environmental benefits, forget carbon credits (?). Regardless, they enjoyed the dim light of the night after exchanging fluids for a long time. The hum of the ventilation fan, which resembled white noise, promoted relaxation, as did the red and white LEDs that matched the colours of the *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms, which were arranged in jars on the windowsills and here and there, decorating the room.

— Have you ever wondered why I came to the Tunnel?

— Had you heard about me?

— Silly.

— Okay, go ahead...

— I had heard about Marcello Baleno. Don't make that face... I had heard about his technical skills. People outside speak highly of the Tunnel and of you, and I wanted to see for myself.

— Go on, Cal — the atmosphere of the evening was perfect, Flieg didn't feel offended, he just wanted to listen to Calipso's voice.

— Marcello, the "vigoressico", brilliant and crazy, opened the doors to the universe from which Draula arrived. Draula, with ears that are antennas and two other aspects who are part of her but also not, a teenager with blue hair pointing upwards. Not to mention Vic, the android who is more human than humans. Schwà, unsurpassable and unclassifiable, and then you, Tapis, and all the other interstitial beings. And just when I thought I had seen everything, Lucifer emerges from a ventilation duct with the idea of working with humans. That is, a lichen offering collaboration to interstitial beings. What else could be missing?

— Now that you've seen all this, will you leave?

— Oh, no Flieg, this is a special place. The things that happen here

cannot happen anywhere else.

— Come on... are you serious?

— Sure, look at Zama: it's small but full of surprises, you never get bored and everyone knows each other more or less, the shadow of the future is long and, purely by chance, the conditions are perfect for collaboration strategies to be beneficial; I mean, playing a non-zero-sum game, where everyone gets something out of it.

— Who would have thought it, Cal...

— It doesn't work like that out there, you always have to watch your ass because certain strategies don't pay off. Everything that isn't Zama is a non-place.

— And I thought that Flavio Anfiteatro's was a perversion... but you tell me it's normal.

— That's right. But that's normal there; normal here is what we talked about earlier.

— A bit confusing. If Tap were here, he would say that there is no single normality, etc., and then he would prove it with some theory.

— Sure, and then you'd go on and on about some grand scheme related to all this.

— Cal, do you think Tap knows, I mean, do you think he knows everything you said?

— I think Draula knows it too, and maybe even Lucifer; that lichen knows a lot.

— Is that possible?

— Never say never. I'll ask him tomorrow..

— Ah... this is all wonderful.

— All this is the reticular world, Flieggy.

Meanwhile, in the tunnel, the evening twilight was turning into night with the melancholic slowness typical of temperate zones. In the tropics, it happens more quickly. Fewer and fewer people were strolling and chatting along the Trasimeno avenue, and Calipso's earrings were turning into a dreamlike yellow futon.

— What if Lucifer doesn't know?

— And what changes? — Calipso was already more asleep than awake.

— I mean, in sum...

- In sum? Non zero!
- Here we are.

The white and red LEDs of the ventilation fan continued to play with the caps of the *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms, which thrived, oblivious to the concerns of Flieg and Calipso. The transformation of the metamorphic earrings into futons was complete, and Flieg realised that it was time to sleep. Tomorrow (soon, according to Lucifer) would be the start of a new and busy day at work.

Panspermia

In the dim light of the ventilation duct, Lucifer and the *triumfeminae* had understood each other on the fundamental issues, and the particulars flowed as smoothly as cold beer in summer. The girls could distinguish whether a glyph represented a letter, a word or a concept; they had noticed that certain glyphs before another gave a diminutive meaning, while if they came after, they increased the meaning; and that sequences of glyphs expressed an action. All this was thanks to Marcello Baleno's probabilistic *interpretes* and the sharpness (speed) of their synaptic connections. Lucifer, not to be outdone, had associated the girls' lip language with the meanings proposed by Marcello's translator. Around lunchtime, when the morning twilight faded into early afternoon, communication proceeded rapidly and the *interpretes* was used only in doubtful cases. The *triumfeminae* spoke to the lichen and he responded by drawing glyphs in the semi-darkness in the form of jagged luminous circles, the colour of sodium yellow. Semi-invisible rays of light emanated from the photophores, drawing glyphs floating in the air like holograms.

As soon as they understood each other, they got down to business. Lucifer gave birth to pieces and bits of himself, which the girls collected in special chitin-lined baskets. The padding made from treated chitin was softer than the feathers of a fattened goose, and according to the girls, it provided a cosy environment for Lucifer's newborn clones. True, false or just probable, it was a feminine

approach. Lucifer gave birth to clones of himself with the usual action that evoked eroticism; a kind of eroticism. Calipso noticed it loud and clear, while wondering if Vic ever noticed it. She was more inclined to think that it was beyond the android's purposes; it was one thing to convert fritters into direct current and quite another to complicate his life with all the chores related to sex and so on. For Draula, it was perhaps a little early, and then there was the trinity to complicate matters.

Then there was the issue of spreading the clones. They couldn't do it all by themselves. Lucifer had been prolific and had only stopped because the girls had run out of chitin baskets. There was a fair number of young Luciferi waiting to be spread, and even with the help of Tap and Flieg, it would be a challenge. Taking advantage of their lunch break, they returned to the Agency, assuring Lichen that they would be back soon to finish the job. As they nibbled on the tigelle they had bought by weight from Furia Tranquilla, and the twilight coming in from the Trasimeno avenue reverberated on the rainforest patterns of the team's tank tops (they always chose camouflage clothing on missions), Tapis had the idea of asking the Pastafarians for help. He was convinced that they would not be too surprised and would welcome their new friends as yet another manifestation of the Prodigious One.

— As you know, my friend — Annibale Birillo had said to Tapis — we are open to everyone: humans, aliens, mutants and transgender people. Why wouldn't we welcome this further manifestation of the Prodigious One? Need a hand?

The team, reinforced by the Pastafarians, immediately got back to work. After introductions between Lucifer and the Pastafarians, they created a transport chain for the clones, from the master conduit to the church, then placing them in the pastaover room so that they were always within reach of a glyph; the clones were highly sociable and hated feeling isolated. The girls had discussed the glyph range at length with Lucifer to come to a good understanding. After some back and forth mediated by the *interpretes*, they all agreed that for good diffusion, a matrix of Luciferi should be created in constant luminous contact with each other; in short, they had to be within

glyph range. When the last new creature had been placed in the warehouse *ad ditributionem*, the girls sat down exhausted in the Agency to drink a sip of red wine. In order not to let their brains go idle, they wondered whether at this point it was possible/necessary to talk about a single Lucifer or many Luciferi, or even additional aspects of the same Lucifer, in short, not a trinity like Draula, but a multiplicity. Perhaps Ario, the monk who was unemployed due to a lack of followers, would have had a complicated opinion on the matter. For once, Tapis didn't have a ready answer, and he wrapped his jacket around himself thoughtfully. Flieg's concern was to keep the level of red wine in his friends' glasses high and to keep Calipso's shapely thighs within reach, which she displayed with earrings forged in the shape of combat boots. The question had been postponed because at the moment it was more urgent to spread the word (?) than to speculate. Since the simple interstitials, intrigued by the clones settled here and there by the Pastafarians, had asked if they could participate in the operation, within an afternoon the spread of young Luciferi had become a viral meme, a frenzy that had infected the entire Zama. Given the physical limitations of Lucifer senior (he could not give birth to clones continuously), it was understood that the spread had to be done in stages, always using the same tried and tested method: the warehouse was filled with *ad ditributionem* and then Pastafarians and simple interstitials emptied it, settling the clones wherever they happened to be, but always within glyph range. After three days, no one else had shown up to receive the clone to be spread, so the *triumfeminae* assumed that the ecumenical spread had been successfully completed.

— But these berries are pretty good. They go well with prosecco, not like the appetisers, but I bet the berries are healthier.

— You can bet on it, Flieg.

On the fourth day after the dissemination, in the early afternoon when the twilight was still streaming vigorously through the windows open onto the square in front of the Pastafarian church, the tunnel company gathered in the central office of the subsidiary agency to discuss the latest events. In the morning, the *triumfeminae* had

gone to Lucifer, both as a courtesy visit and to inform him of the success of the dissemination, then returned to the Agency with a basket of chitin full of berries.

— Lucifer says that to thank us for spreading him, we have earned a kind of nutritional allowance.

— Cappuccino and croissants too, Cal?

— Flieg, he says he can try, but for now we have to make do with the berries from the pact, which are good and better for our health.

— Finally, — Tapis intervened, — how should we consider Lucifer? One or many?

— I believe — Draula said his piece — that it can be considered a single being, but with many aspects that communicate with each other.

Draula's opinion, who had some experience with complex lives, was accepted by everyone; although, as always, if a better opinion had emerged, they would have discussed it. When the work was done, they decided to take a short holiday and dressed accordingly. Vic wore an orange outfit (bermuda shorts and a tank top) that stood out starkly against the dim light of the central office. Calipso wore beach chair earrings that matched the transparency of her tank top, Flieg joined in with sunglasses (with photochromic lenses, of course) and a baseball cap (?), Draula wore a white tennis outfit (on Trantor, people go to the beach like this?), which stood out under her electric blue hair pointing towards infinity. Even Tapis had taken off his jacket, hanging it on his chitin chair, showing off his contemplative physique. Vic, between one berry and another, pointed out that in addition to their energy allowance, from now on they could also count on the glyphic matrix. This was both an additional lighting system and an information system. It was a lighting system because the chatter between Lucifer's multiple aspects was constant and lasted until late at night, making the twilight less dim and as thick as chestnut honey. It was an information system because, through trial and error, all the interstitials would come to understand Lucifer and his many aspects, both for chatting and for important information. In short, once again, and as only in the Tunnel could happen, a three-way

symbiosis (trimbiosis?) was born, distributing benefits to everyone: fungi, algae, humans, aliens and androids.

That evening, when only an interstitial being could perceive the infinitesimal variation in light that made the difference between day and night, the glyphic matrix made Zama shine, as well as look splendid. Every house, every balcony or window sill, every interstice that could contain one of Lucifer's many aspects, emanated circular glyphs that conveyed information about the expectations of the new symbiotic (trimbiont?) citizens in relation to: nutrient substrate, quantity and quality of carbon dioxide in the air, considerations on the new partnership with the interstitials, etc. In short, the splendid Zama was growing.

Cap. 10 — The Quantum Pantograph

- What's that thing on the table, Tap? It looks menacing.
- It's a quantum pantograph, Flieg.
- Mm... in other words?
- Do you know about quantum teleportation?
- No.
- Great. Have you ever heard of entanglement?
- Never... but it sounds good.
- I knew you would like it.

The morning twilight entered the central office of the subsidiary agency with increasing intensity. Flieg and Calipso had just returned from the two Ottavias with cappuccino and croissants. Only Draula and Tapis were in the office because Vic and Schwà were out in the Tunnel, looking for something to apply their unquenchable creativity to. Etna slept near Draula in the yellow plastic ashtray. Draula wore shorts and a canary-coloured tank top, matching the ashtray; the electric blue of his geotropically negative hair stood out elegantly. Stromboli was perched on his mobile perch just outside the office, observing and recording everything, while Calipso's metamorphic earrings were forged in pencil; she was in a creative phase. Tapis was his usual self, wrapped in his multi-purpose jacket and looking serious. Flieg had just placed breakfast on the table, the croissants looked soft and crispy, the cappuccinos were in transparent plastic cups with chitin lids: the two Ottavias' cappuccinos in glass.

— Marcello did it yesterday after his first training session but before his third protein meal. You know what he's like, don't you?

— That's really cool, Tap. But what's it for? — asked Flieg as he began to nibble on a croissant.

Tapis explained that Marcello had made two bidirectional quantum pantographs and had sent one to Zama with the caravan carrying the mushroom grappa. He also emphasised that there were two pantographs, not as a tribute to dualism (the interstitial claim that it does not exist) but because Olivia and Minerva had heard about the products from the south and wanted to introduce these novelties to Utica. The two, who were still in perfect romantic harmony, wanted to import the red wine that everyone raved about; during one of their frequent moments of amorous ecstasy, they had thought that perhaps there was a better way to get it than travelling back and forth (on foot) through the service tunnel, with all that melmetta. They had discussed it with Marcello and, as usual, it was easier for him to do than to say. He told the two lovers that within a couple of days he would set up a prototype and do a couple of transmission tests. One of the biggest problems he had to overcome, Tapis continued, was the hopper, which was needed to bring atoms, molecules and who knows what else into quantum contiguity. The issue had been resolved thanks to the advice of Schwà, who was the leading expert on subatomic remodelling (due to his metabolism) that they knew.

— You don't mean to say that with that contraption, something in Utica can be here in a nanosecond and vice versa?

— That's right, Flieg.

— Mm... an upside-down oven. Instead of putting something in to cook, you take something out that's already done. Not bad.

— But it's small, there isn't much space inside, observed Calipso, being practical, being a girl.

— It's just a prototype. If it works, Marcello will make one as big as Schroedinger's box

— Gasp, — observed Flieg — but can humans be transmitted too?

— Mm... I doubt it — said Tapis — there's a lot of theory to sort out first.

— You can tell Marcello had wine bottles in mind when he created the prototype; it looks like a wine shop (?). — Draula, who was always interested in human things, even though she was an alien.

— That's right — confirmed Schwà — with his rolling Texan accent, who had returned to the office with Vic, carrying something sinister in his hand. — Here's the raw material: catabolites. If you hold your noses, I'll pour it into the airtight hopper so we can test the transmission.

— Wait until I finish my croissants. — Flieg always on the spot.

The glow of Zama's twilight had increased by at least a couple of lumens since Lucifer had spread. This was during the day; at night, its multiple aspects, perhaps out of respect for the sleeping humans, or perhaps because they too had a circadian rhythm, stopped chattering and Zama returned to being splendid, as well as shining. Once the croissants were finished, Schwà, with Vic's help, poured the raw material into the hopper. In Utica, Marcello had already filled the compartment of the brother pantograph (entanglement) with raw material. In his capacity as head of raw material procurement (subatomic particles), Schwà had visited the hydroponic greenhouses in the surrounding area to find the most ignoble catabolites he could find for the hopper. In his opinion, the more they stank, the better they would embrace the sister particles in Utica. Inside the hopper, the catabolites were broken down into quarks, gluons and who knows what else, forming what Marcello called the primordial soup. When a molecule from Utica arrived in Zama's pantograph, it immediately sought out its sister because of the quantum embrace. Then the hopper provided what was needed and the job was done. When they embraced, the molecule here became an exact copy of the molecule there. One molecule at a time, the material to be copied was reconstructed, and since it was a quantum affair, it didn't even take that long.

Marcello had built the pantograph using the same principle as the bidirectional *interprets*. Before transmission, it was necessary to establish whose turn it was, like a walkie-talkie. After airing the room and seeing that it was their turn to transmit, they placed a bottle of Interstitial in the compartment of the machine, which looked like the

door of an oven or the lid of a vertical sarcophagus. The image evoked by the pantograph worried Flieg, who was of the opinion that they should try something less valuable than red wine, such as a pair of flip-flops or underwear. But he didn't say anything for fear of being elbowed by Calipso, whose earrings had just completed their transformation into question marks. Before Flieg could even ask when he was going to start, the transfer process was already over. To highlight the success of the experiment, Marcello had sent, via a protocol established in advance with Draula, a video showing the bottle of Interstitial of Utica (the clone) covered in quantum frost on the monitor in the central office, evaporating in such a harmonious way as to evoke an analogue algorithm. With the same delicacy with which he would have touched Calipso's breasts, Flieg removed the bottle of wine from the pantograph to check that there was no damage. Before he even had time to look for a corkscrew to proceed with the organoleptic test, a bottle of mushroom grappa sent by Marcello materialised (cloned) in the sarcophagus (pantograph), covered with the same cybernetic frost. A second later, the image of the bottle of grappa at Marcello's house appeared on the monitor, clear proof that it had not been annihilated (since the danger existed); nor had the bottle of red wine at Zama la splendida been annihilated.

Towards the end of the morning, they all went to the two Ottavias for a quick lunch, with the original bottle, still unopened, and the grappa clone, to celebrate the historic event, which would somehow revolutionise interstitial trade. They sat down at a table with a bowl full of pact berries. Every day, the two Ottavias watered their multiple aspects of Lucifer, who stood right in front of the entrance to the post office, clinging to the fake Etruscan arch made of chitin that formed the entrance to the restaurant. To show his gratitude, Lucifer produced berries of the pact every day, which they then used as appetisers for their customers. Customers who, just before entering, enjoyed the sight of Lucifer (or his multiple appearances) growing like capers of the past on the walls and rocks of the south. It would not be long before the two Octavias could exchange chatter and opinions with the lichen thanks to Marcello's probabilistic

*interpre*s, and at that point, integration would be complete.

Those extra lumens had made Zama's twilight less cobalt blue; in some ways, it had turned towards a sodium yellow, and the reflections it produced were warmer, less plutonic, almost amber, like chestnut honey. When it came time to taste the mushroom grappa, they all agreed that it was delicious as always, but that it lacked that certain something to make it the same as the original. Schwà muttered something like, — Mm... a little less cadaverine and a few more terpenes... — before following the others back to the agency. In the afternoon, they would do more experiments with the pantograph.

Grappa and berries on the terrace

— Cali, do you think the Lucifers are male and female, or something else?

— Um... are you getting tired of me or are you interested in extreme sex?

The twilight of night entered with a certain intensity into Cali and Flieg's attic in the third dimension. Lucifer, whom they had adopted, seemed to like his new home. They had placed him between two vases of *Amanita muscaria*, which matched the red and white LEDs of the ventilation fan. He was happy there because he had a vase all to himself and there was a certain degree of kinship between the fungal part of the lichen and the *Amanita*. The only thing he had asked for was to be within glyph range of some other Lucifer, so that he could stay in touch with the community, keep up to date with the latest news and gossip, and send his greetings to Lucifer senior from time to time. This testified to the sociability of the Lucifer population. Every day, when Calipso watered him, he thanked her with particular luminous glyphs that she had learned to recognise, to which she replied with the *interpre*s before leaving for breakfast. In the evening, when Calipso and Flieg returned from the Agency, they gathered the berries of the pact that their Lucifer had produced.

They also got along well with mushroom grappa.

They sat on the terrace with their backs against the chitin window frames and their legs intertwined. From the Trasimeno avenue, just below the terrace, came the interstitial chatter of those entering or leaving the Comida di Furia Tranquilla, or of those who were just passing by. Calipso's metamorphic earrings oscillated between a question mark and a hammock, between curiosity and relaxation, unable to decide on one shape or the other.

— No one could ever tire of you, Cali, but are the berries already gone? What a shame... but who knows how many luciferi there will be, wondered Flieg. — Zama was now shining with his own light; a few hairy contributions spared.

As far as she knew, Calipso argued, they could be either one or the other, meaning both male and female and hermaphrodite. They were so cute anyway, the berries of the pact were so delicious, and those two or three extra lumens of light came in handy during the day. And then, once social integration was complete, you know, all the extra chatter? What was incredible, — Calipso said, was how they hadn't missed them before they got to know them. Flieg found the last thought circular, but didn't say anything because of the late hour.

— I think it's time to go to bed, Cali, judging by your earrings.

— Yes, I'm sleeping standing up, or rather sitting down.

— Even Lucifer has stopped chatting with the others, look...

— Sweet dreams, Flieg — Calipso had just settled down on the futon made of treated chitin, which was softer than cotton. — Ah, Flieg... in a few days, a friend from the south is coming to visit us.

— Oh! Very good.

— **Riccardo, the atheist philosopher**

— The memetologist... I am a memetologist by profession.

— Gulp!

Exclaimed in unison by the members of the Tunnel company, except for Draula, who already knew its meaning, being omniscient.

Schwà did not seem troubled either, but for other reasons. They had opted for dinner at the Ottavie's, because meeting Riccardo, the atheist philosopher, was supposed to be a convivial occasion. La Comida di Furia Tranquilla was more suitable for quick snacks or informal meetings. The guest arrived an odd number of days after Calipso had announced his arrival. The recurrence of odd numbers in the interstitial's lives was once again significant of their aversion to dualism. The first thing you noticed about him was his smile, then you saw everything else. He was tall and thin with little hair on his head. Then you noticed that he was elegant in his toga (as befitted a philosopher) and that he was carefully shaved: arms, legs, nose and ears. In short, if anyone had seen a statue of Julius Caesar, they would have thought that Riccardo was his reincarnation. Perhaps he thought, like Caesar, that hair was one of the most stupid things in the universe. He and Calipso had been friends for a long time and she had told him about the wonders of the Tunnel, so Riccardo had decided to visit it to see for himself.

— And what does a memetologist do to earn a living? — asked Flieg curiously.

The berries of the pact, like the philosopher's fritters, were on the chitin table, resigned to the teeth of the friends seated around it. A bottle of red Interstitial was ready for energetic palates, while for more refined tastes there was a bottle of fresh and sparkling prosecco. The two Ottavias were giving their best, putting vegetables on the table to be eaten raw with oil and salt as appetisers; they all came from the *hortus conclusus* of the post station. This was a recent innovation by the two partners, given the positive trend in business after the battle of Trasimeno. It was the first cybernetically managed hydroponic greenhouse, with feedback mechanisms and differential adjustment of the plants' living conditions. For their part, the plants felt like they were on a permanent holiday and responded by bursting with health. The two Ottavias only had to pick them and serve them at the table, as well as occasionally refilling the nutrient hoppers. Calipso was sitting next to Riccardo, showing off her metamorphic earrings in the shape of shiny cutlery, so hypnotic that they distracted attention from her

truncated cone hairstyle, but not so hypnotic as to distract from the transparency of her freshly laundered tank top.

— To put lunch and dinner together, I raise mutant butterflies down south.

— Mutant?

— Yes, mutants; when they are in their caterpillar stage, they produce molecular silk, which is very fine and appreciated by females, homosexuals, transgender people, and so on.

— Oh!

The extra couple of lumens provided by the incessant chatter of the luceferi had changed the glow of the twilight: from plutonic it had become post-amber and was very reminiscent of mountain honey, albeit less dense. The new glow gave different meanings to things that were the same as before, such as Vic and Calipso's tank tops. This was especially true in the station's dining room, where bioluminescent lamps on fake Doric half-columns accentuated the post-amber reflections of the tables, plates, cutlery, tank tops and flip-flops with their sodium yellow light.

— So as not to come empty-handed — said Riccardo, opening his travelling bag — I have brought some samples as gifts for you, dear friends. Since you love sheer fabrics, Cali, I have a special fabric for you.

Alarmed by Riccardo's use of the diminutive, and seeing that he had sat down next to Calipso ready for anything, Flieg had placed his hand on the beautiful oriental woman's shapely thigh, just in case. The philosopher explained that the mutation had appeared by chance after some nuclear accident, he wasn't sure if it was direct or indirect, because of the radioactive mulberry leaves the caterpillars ate, but it didn't matter, he and a couple of friends had taken advantage of it. Then he had distributed the gifts to the girls: Draula was ecstatic, Vic's neural swarm was pressing her to express something similar to grateful embarrassment for such a beautiful gift, and Calipso held the impalpable, transparent fabric in her hands, looking at it with her mouth open; Flieg had also touched it with his free hand, thinking that Calipso would be even more attractive (exciting) wearing a tank top like that.

— But what does molecular silk have to do with memetics? — asked Flieg, his hand still on Calipso's thigh.

— Nothing at all, replied Riccardo, — molecular silk is only good for putting lunch and dinner together. Memetics, on the other hand, is good for covering your ass.

— Oh!

It seemed that the members of the Tunnel company were mostly producing monosyllabic comments that evening. Stromboli Ottimo Massimo, on the other hand, exhibited another emerging behaviour, induced by the neural swarm confined within his artificial, bird-like skull. While chatting with Lucifer, he moved left and right on his perch and bobbed his head up and down (like a parrot), perhaps because he was excited, or as if they were telling jokes. Draula was calm, so everything was under control. Meanwhile, they had reached the philosopher's second round of fritters and the second bottle of prosecco. Schwà, who was listening to everything with detached interest, was sitting next to Vic and trying (as always) to hide his disgust for good food, while sucking ignoble catabolites from his airtight thermos; he was very well versed on the subject of mutations.

— Can you give some examples, erudite guest? I mean: memetics and ass protection. — Tapis interrupted the series of monosyllabic comments as he bit into a fritter.

— With pleasure, friends, I will tell you about a toxin from the past and how it spread: a meme known as dogma.

— Dogma?

— Yes, dogma equals meme; there were several pagan sects that used this meme for their own self-propagation — said Riccardo, pausing briefly as if to see if they were really willing to listen to him.

— Go ahead, Riccardo, we're listening. — Tapis speaking for everyone.

— The cunning of the meme is surprising. With just a few simple elements, it complicates the lives of many: a verb, a prophet, a book. The only rule is that the verb must be immutable, which is why it must be written in a book by the prophet. Once it is written down somewhere, most of the work is done. Then the meme uses

the brains of humans to replicate itself across time and space.

— Gosh! Like a virus...

— Exactly, Flieg, exactly. A virus uses DNA to replicate itself, the meme uses the human brain to do the same thing. Note the catastrophic effect of this. Like any swarm, even the human swarm subject to dogma exhibits completely unpredictable emerging behaviours: wars, massacres, genocides and so on. In short, from those five or ten rules that every meme imposes (which are simple and harmless in themselves), when enough brains (that use them) are put together, catastrophe becomes inevitable.

— Damn, that's toxic stuff, commented Flieg.

— Of course: *ubi dogma malum paratur!* It should be avoided like the plague.

— Oh! — The Latin quotation (effective even in the Tunnel) had restored the monosyllabic comment.

— Another toxic meme is ideology, same thing, same mode of dissemination, it takes hold of the brain and uses it for its own ends. To be avoided at all costs; ideology is the enemy of truth: *veritas amica dubitationum!*

— Gasp!

The post-amber twilight had returned to plutonic darkness because the luciferi, tired of chatting, had said good night and fallen asleep. Vic, who still had some lithium ions left in his battery, suggested another round of fritters. The proposal was accepted unanimously, including by the philosopher. Riccardo, in addition to studying philosophy and breeding mutant caterpillars, was also an expert in philology. He claimed to have studied a lot of historical documents and believed that reticularism was a good antidote to the toxins of dogma and various ideologies. He therefore urged them, in a friendly manner, to continue in this vein, since they were a kind of antivirus, comparing dogma and the like to viruses. Draula, who had amazed everyone by wearing a space blue outfit (shorts and tank top) that matched his hair, and who perhaps already knew everything because he expressed an omniscient trinity, asked Riccardo why he thought an antivirus could have emerged in the Tunnel, interrupting the series of monosyllabic comments. The

philosopher explained that in the Tunnel, due to many things, which he would explain if they wanted him to, in the eternal dilemma: fuck or collaborate, the “payoff” (?) went in the direction of collaboration. It was a purely arithmetic question; in fact, if they wanted, he would even draw them a diagram (like a naval battle) to clarify, because he happened to be a studious game theorist. In short, in those conditions, not only did people tend to cooperate, but dogmatic-ideological metastasis did not take root. Calipso had by then nudged Flieg, not because he had his hand on her thigh, but because she had also come to the same conclusions as the philosopher. Riccardo, who by then had a dry throat, downed a glass of prosecco and called for a coffee break. He had noticed the Lucifer glyphs of the two Octavias and, due to his professional (scientific) bias, had to investigate.

While the new fritters met their inevitable fate, which in at least one case was to be transformed into five volts of direct current, Riccardo chatted with Stromboli and Lucifer, who had resumed emitting glyphs, understanding even though he was sleepy. Ottavia minore had joined the three, with her triple chignon and cane slung over her shoulder; she wanted to understand why her Lucifer was so popular. After a couple of minutes, the four of them were laughing uncontrollably (including Lucifer, using a series of glyphic emoticons) as if they were telling each other funny stories or making predictions about non-reticulated beings.

— Not only am I not surprised that a lichen is intelligent, panpsychism has been around for a long time, and I didn't invent it, but I'm also not surprised that it wants to collaborate with the interstitials.

The atheist philosopher argued, after his coffee break and chat with Lucifer, that if it was true, as he believed it to be, that language is a medium, a structure through which the worldview of the speaker is shaped (he was the philologist, wasn't he?), then the Lucifers, given that their alien language consisted of luminous circles, albeit a little jagged, could only have one world view: unified, infinite, eternal, balanced and harmonious, with the circle representing all that beautiful stuff. Consequently, they were inclined to collaborate.

He added that all this, but, could only happen in the Tunnel because of what he had said before. That is to say, only and exclusively in the Tunnel could it happen (and only by chance but with an option for necessity) that the “payoff” would go in the direction of collaboration rather than screwing things up. Outside the Tunnel, to the north and south, but also to the east and west, the Luciferi would be used as fuel for fire, after being dried out.

— But those who speak German... what kind of worldview do they have? — Flieg wondered.

The lapidary comment pointed out that the fritters were finished, as were the bottles of wine. But the bottle of quantum grappa was not yet finished. Flieg had proposed an experiment on entanglement: to see if drinking a few glasses of the copy in Zama would also reduce the contents of the original bottle in Utica. After the second glass, it was necessary to explain to Riccardo that it was better not to move on to the third (due to the risk of alcohol poisoning); to distract themselves, they asked Marcello to check the state of the original bottle. He, who had just finished his midnight snack (to maintain the roundness of his muscles close to π , etc.), sent a photo of the bottle showing that the contents were unchanged. The complete success of the quantum pantograph was celebrated in the Plutonic semi-darkness of splendid Zama; Ottavia minore was showing signs of impatience because she wanted to close up shop.

Cap. 11 — Polyploids

Riccardo, the atheist philosopher, had stayed for an odd number of days (another odd occurrence) with his friends at the Tunnel. He had spent the night in the subsidiary agency in the guest room, which had been created with a chitin screen. He had treated his room with care and kindness, including the screen, in case chitin was sentient (panpsychism). Since the window of his room overlooked the courtyard of the Pastafarian Church, a courtesy visit to the beverendo Hannibal Birillo was inevitable. After carefully shaving, as he did every morning, and putting on a freshly laundered toga, he went to visit him, bringing him a bottle of teleported mushroom grappa as a gift. Annibale Birillo, who was wearing a pirate outfit that day, with baggy trousers below the knee and a black corset over his hairy chest, with several white fish bones (3D printed) hanging from it, welcomed him warmly. As always, he wore his black pirate hat, complete with crossbones and skull, but he didn't have his fake wooden leg and hook instead of a hand because he only wore them on Fridays, for pastaover. They had talked at length about theology and philology, drinking Pastafarian beer, which flows from a volcano (in their paradise) and runs in rivers. While the beverendo adjusted his pirate eye patch, the philosopher had words of praise for the only human religion ever invented. Riccardo argued that it was a human religion because beer also flowed in the Pastafarian hell, only it was sour; he was convinced that the humanity or otherwise of a religion is also judged by the punishments it metes out, as well as by encouraging people to respect those who do not think the same way,

rather than organising massacres.

As a good philologist, he had carefully read the sacred book of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, discovering comforting concepts such as inclusivity, where everyone was accepted, including homosexuals and others, and equality, where males and females and others were equal and had to be respected. Not to mention the right of withdrawal, an innovative condition of use whereby if, after a thirty-day trial period, the religion did not satisfy you, you had the right to return to your old god; the fact that, in addition to rivers of beer in paradise, there was also a club full of strippers, male or female depending on sexual orientation (which, as already mentioned, was completely accepted as long as it was non-violent), was a significant novelty and, in his opinion, positive compared to most religions of the past. And then there was the rejection of dogma, which in his case was like kicking down an open door. The beauty of the concept that Pastafarians were willing to believe that the Prodigious One did not exist and had not created the universe, if only someone could prove it scientifically, needed no comment. In any case, no one so far (in the last two centuries) had ever managed to prove the non-existence of the Prodigious One. In short, Riccardo argued that his atheism was so deeply rooted that it did not allow him to embrace Pastafarianism, but if one day he ever had a drop in blood sugar and decided to convert, he would become a follower of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, because it was the best religion humans had ever invented; all the pagan sects of the past could not compare; at least that was his opinion..

Shortly before the philosopher left, Annibale Birillo had insisted that Riccardo try the sacrament of communion as a free trial, even though it was not Friday. They had eaten (in peace) a hearty plate of spaghetti with meat sauce (far from transparent ostia) and agreed that communion was energising and invigorating, as well as putting them in a good mood. Before leaving the Tunnel, he stopped to say goodbye to Lucifer of the two Octavias, promising that the next time he was in the area he would bring him some organic fertiliser that would stimulate his growth by at least a couple of millimetres in a year. Lucifer thanked him, saying that so far he had had pleasant

encounters with humans. Unfortunately, he realised that not all were like that, but he could still consider himself satisfied so far. The two Octavias had greeted him affectionately and given him a bag with some pact berries, bread and cheese to eat during his journey. A complimentary packed lunch, in short, like in hotels before the implosion.

Interstitial encounters

— Hello friends, how are you? I am Aulus Transustanziatius, everyone calls me Trans for short. This is Velia Sibilla Sidus, everyone calls her Stella.

A week had passed since the atheist philosopher had left, and the late morning gloom poured in through the windows of the subsidiary agency's central office, but not through the door facing the Pastafarian church square. This was because Trans and Sidus were standing in the doorway (occupying it entirely, perhaps even more), as they had not yet been given permission to enter. This qualified them as polite organisms; what remained to be understood was whether they were human or something else. Not that it made all that much difference in any case, as for Pastafarians, inclusivity was a given even in the Tunnel. In the meantime, they were tall and large, each looking like a double wardrobe, with features that tended towards human but also not.

— All the best, unknown friends. If you want to come in, we can get to know each other and maybe have an aperitif since it's almost lunchtime.

Tapis had answered on behalf of everyone. As soon as the morning twilight, obscured by the two figures, returned, Calipso turned to see what was happening, her metamorphic earrings shaped like question marks. Flieg, who was sitting next to her as usual, put a hand on her shapely thigh (just in case), while her braids swayed curiously. Tapis was as imperturbable as ever in his multi-purpose jacket, his face sharp and his hair straight, long and grey. Vic and Schwà were chatting about their plans and hadn't even

noticed the arrival of the two. Draula was not surprised, partly because she was omniscient and partly because Stromboli ottimo massimo had seen them coming. She had continued to take care of Etna with a hydroponic lettuce leaf, trying not to ruin her freshly laundered yellow and black checked suit, which contrasted beautifully with her electric blue hair. This was an informal meeting and everyone else was wearing Bermuda shorts, tank tops and flip-flops as usual: Calipso's tank top was see-through and Flieg's Bermuda shorts were blue with vertical white stripes. Tapis had added two seats to the table by improvising a bench and everyone squeezed up a little to make room for their new bulky friends.

— Cali, have you seen the fantastic clothes they have?

— Flieg, I don't think they're clothes, they look like real feathers and plumes they're wearing.

— Why are they so big, Cal?

— They will be polyploid.

— Gasp... if the feathers are real, they're also mutated.

Trans had a coat of turquoise feathers covering his entire body. Here and there, the white plumage beneath the feathers was visible, under his armpits and even in some more intimate places. Only his face, hands and feet were exposed, but covered with a fabric that could very well have been skin, or silicone leather (in the case of androids, which was something to be clarified). His face was pleasant and regular with a hint of tiny feathers on his eyebrows, the rest being normal. He wore a turquoise leather necklace, matching his plumage, with a liver-coloured liver-shaped pendant hanging from it. Sidus was the gentle version of Trans. The feathers were bright silver, though not reflective, and the white plumage created a seductive see-through effect (appearing and disappearing as it moved). Her face was more oval than Trans's, and her reflective eyebrows were hypnotic. The shadow of mascara on her normal (normal?) eyelashes and a trace of foundation on her cheeks made her attractive, even though she was covered in feathers. She wore two liver-shaped earrings furrowed by tiny clear lines that divided them into lobes. They gave the impression of two gentle, polite organisms, well disposed to dialogue, even though they were at

least two metres twenty tall, as wide as a wardrobe and covered in feathers. Anyone who happened to pass by the door of the subsidiary agency would have noticed them.

— So, apart from the feathers and their size, which seem to be bigger, these guys seem almost normal, eh Cal?

— Oh! — Calipso brought her hand to her mouth. — Everything's bigger... even the... oh my God...

— What's up, Cali? What's going on?

— No, nothing... forget it, Flieg... — Calipso tried to compose herself, while her metamorphic earrings took on the appearance of two orgasmic red pulsars.

— Gasp... I think I understand... — Flieg, who seemed to notice only then the swelling of Sidus's feathers (in the breast area) and stared at them mesmerised, demonstrating that Sidus's feathers had the same effect as Vic and Calipso's tank tops.

— Not bad, this prosecco, eh guys? Tell us a little about yourselves, come on... — Tapis had seized the moment and overcome the impasse.

Trans, supported by Sidus, said that they came from the south, but not that far south, more towards the centre. They said it was a place where their ancestors had lived, although at that time they did not have feathers, but then many other things had happened, such as the appearance of feathers, polyploidy and various other minor things. But their knowledge had remained the same. They would tell them about it soon because that was why they had come to the Tunnel. Trans had a pleasant, deep voice, and as he spoke, he gestured and emphasised his points with his hands, producing iridescent reflections between turquoise and white, which did not distract his listeners. Sidus, who had explained to his friends in the Tunnel that (to avoid any misunderstanding) they were biological beings and not androids, had a persuasive voice as well as seductive eyes. His eyes were silver like feathers, while Trans's were turquoise. Flieg wondered if there was any connection between the colour of their feathers and their eyes. When Sidus wasn't talking, he stood with his arms crossed, highlighting the bulge in his chest at breast height, which Flieg couldn't stop staring at, mesmerised, at least

since he had understood its meaning. Perhaps he was expecting to see a nipple peeking out from between the feathers.

— Two Octavias? Furia Tranquilla? — Tapis suggested, thinking that the new arrivals were hungry.

— There's more room between the two Ottavias, and it's right behind us. — Vic suggested, beginning to run out of energy, out of empathy for the new arrivals.

— Excellent... everyone to the two Ottavias.

I piumati erano passati di misura sotto il finto arco etrusco in chitina della stazione di posta delle due Ottavie. Sidus aveva osservato, con la voce soave, che anche da loro al Fanum (?) c'erano dei luciferi, ma sopravvivevano solo in qualche area dimenticata da tutti. La maggior parte di loro era usata come combustibile, previo essiccamento (*quod erat demonstrandum*). Un vero delitto, visto che sono così carini e comunicativi, era stato il suo commento; ma d'altra parte cosa vuoi mai aspettarti: certi umani sono così... umani.

Ottavia minore aveva rimediato una panca robusta e tutti si erano attovagliati. Vic e Schwà si erano seduti vicino a Trans e Sidus e stavano chiacchierando dei rispettivi metabolismi. Vic, che quel giorno indossava un completo (bermuda e canottiera) argento satinato, non era meno seducente di Sidus. Schwà da quando aveva saputo che il metabolismo dei piumati era simile al suo si sentiva meno solo, dal punto di vista fisiologico. Dal punto di vista sociale era soddisfatto dei suoi amici interstiziali. In pratica Sidus e Trans avevano il metabolismo basato sulla fisica quantistica, proprio come Schwà, mangiavano e bevevano di tutto proprio come Vic. Solo che lei trasformava il cibo in corrente continua, mentre loro in cataboliti organici.

— Cali, what do you think...

— Another one of your morbid curiosities, Flieg?

— What could possibly be morbid about wanting to know whether, during copulation, the feathers move on their own or whether the orifice must be manually opened? It's scientific curiosity.

— Here you go.

Cali and Flieg sat opposite the feathered creatures. Despite his scientific curiosity, Flieg was relaxed and had not yet placed his hand

on Calipso's thigh. She wore metamorphic earrings shaped like livers, including the thin lines that divided them, out of empathy for her new friends. Calipso, as everyone knew by now, always wore the same clothes: a transparent tank top and fringed Bermuda shorts, freshly laundered every day. Her friends had long since stopped wondering how she did it, satisfied by her charm, which was at least equal to Vic's. Draula, ensconced in her trinity, sat at the head of the table because Etna needed space to stretch her legs. Stromboli, on his perch near Lucifer, just outside the post office, observed and recorded everything, without neglecting to chat with the multiple aspects (Lucifer) of the two Ottavias, since they were now friends. Tapis was sitting at the other end of the table and was discussing the menu with Ottavia minore, with the same gravity with which Caesar had decided on the strategy for the battle of Pharsalus. The post office was half empty, or half full, depending on the mood of the observer.

— This is a chimera... or rather, the Chimera.

Trans announced in her deep voice as she placed the gift brought by the feathered creatures on the table. He had placed it between a tray (now empty) of pappardelle with ragù and a mixture of hydroponic vegetables sautéed in a pan with garlic. Since it was Friday, which as everyone knows is the sacred day of Pastafarians, the two Ottavias empathically proposed a menu consistent with the occasion. The moment of the gift's delivery was the best, a clear sign that subtle psychology was not alien to the feathered ones, because they had waited until their hunger had been appeased by the food, reminiscent of the Pastafarian sacrament, and moreover, the first bottle of Interstitial was now empty.

— We didn't think it was nice to arrive empty-handed, so we thought of a small gift. It's a miniature version of a larger statue, made of burnished bronze-like wood and polished. Isn't it pretty?

The chimera looked impressive, with its round head like an angry lion, the body of a goat on a strict diet and a tail shaped like a biting snake. To top it all off, a goat's head protruded from its back and its claws were turned outwards. Among the various monosyllabic comments (Uh! Oh! Ah!), Draula's apparent indifference was

explained by the fact that, being a trine, she was therefore omniscient, and nothing could surprise her because she knew everything. The sculpture glowed honey-coloured, struck as it was by the dim light streaming in through the windows.

— Do you still have room for some mixed fried river fish, guys? — Ottavia minore brought everyone back to a gastronomic dimension.

While everyone was commenting on the magnificent gift and asking Sidus and Trans where it came from and what it meant (because everything has to have a meaning), Draula said, with serene calm, that Dino Sala was coming in. He knew because Stromboli had seen the blue warrior arrive.

— Hello friends, how are you? I knew I would find you all gathered around the table at this time, although I stopped by the agency first to be on the safe side. Is there perhaps a place for me at the table? — asked Dino Sala with his hands on his hips.

When it comes to surprises (at least pleasant ones), the more unexpected they are, the better. And this was precisely the effect that the blue warrior had with his turban, blue skin and enormous, virile pectorals that seemed to want to burst out of his off-white tunic. As on the eve of the Battle of Trasimeno, Calipso was fascinated by those pectorals and hurried to find a chair, making room for him next to her. Flieg, as soon as he heard Dino's name and sensed the threat, tightened his grip on the beautiful oriental woman's shapely thigh. Everyone else was happy to see him again, bombarding him with questions about his health, emotional state, sexual activity and so on. He was pleased to add Sidus and Trans to his circle of friends, demonstrating how normal inclusiveness was among the interstitials, who were not surprised by pens and feathers. It was enough that they were sentient and well-intentioned. Moreover, he had long since become accustomed to particular life forms such as Schwà, who was not the most improbable of living beings. Ottavia minore, attracted by his pectorals, had kidnapped him for a while with the excuse of introducing him to Lucifer and trying to impress him by acting coy. Once the pleasantries (commonplace) were over, they moved on to more substantial matters, such as mixed fried river fish.

— For the eight sacred condiments... there's plenty of room in the *mansio*! — This was Dino Sala's comment as soon as he heard that the feathered friends intended to stay for a few days. Although not a Pastafarian himself, he gladly used their sayings out of empathy.

Trans and Sidus had explained, between mouthfuls, that they were (even though they didn't look like it) travelling *aruspices*, and that they had important divinations to make (things to report), and that in order to do so they first had to acclimatise to the Tunnel. The chimera they had brought as a gift would dispel any doubts, because it was the recognised symbol of their people's excellence in the *ars divinationis*. Moving on to practical matters, acclimatising meant finding a suitable and welcoming place to carry out their work. It was essential that they spend at least a week in the place (which, they emphasised, had to be welcoming) so that they could perform their divination to the best of their ability. They knew why, and that was all for the moment. Given the size of their new friends, they certainly couldn't offer them the third dimension, as it would have collapsed after a few seconds and they would have had problems with stairs, doors and everything else. A polyploid weighs as much as two diploids, if it is a tetraploid, more in other cases. Dino Sala, the blue warrior, had found the solution. He said he had planned a short visit to beautiful Zama, but he was willing to stay as long as necessary for the Feathered Ones to settle in. He would talk to the assassins of the *mansio* and there would be no problems. Every *mansio* had always been built with a stable for horses, even though there had been no horses in sight for a long time. It was a tradition, he said, and traditions must first be known, then understood and finally overcome if they become a nuisance; in this case, no reason had been found to abolish it. Since the stable, Dino continued, was quite large, there was plenty of room for the new friends to settle in comfortably. All that would be needed was to remove the mangers and put up a few chitin panels here and there to create a suitable environment. And since there were no horses, there were no bad smells either. Once the logistical problem had been solved, they agreed, including the feathered ones, that after two bottles of red wine, it was certainly not possible to think about getting back to

work; the wisest choice would be to continue celebrating their new friendship with another bottle of Interstitial.

The polyploid loft

— What do you think that thing is for, Cal?

— I think that thing is a sacrificial altar, Flieg.

Calipso and Flieg had been deemed the most suitable for public relations with the assassins and for monitoring the acclimatisation of the feathered ones. The work lasted five days (another odd occurrence) before Dino Sala declared himself satisfied and left for Utica, much to Flieg's satisfaction, even though Dino had done nothing inappropriate with Calipso. He was more than satisfied with his three wives and eight children (he had enough) to look for further trouble. The afternoon twilight, streaming in through the arched windows of the (now former) stable of the *mansio*, now a loft for the polyploids, cast rectangles of dark light on a massive chitin table supported by four pillars.

— You mean someone's going to be disembowelled on that table?

— I don't know... we'll learn it tomorrow.

The table, which gave off iridescent reflections ranging from cobalt blue to purple, stood in the centre of the loft. Trans and Sidus were at the Isarco pond (?) just outside the tunnel at that moment, taking their ritual bath (always on the day before the auspicious day) and then drying their feathers (and pens) in the sun. The rest of the loft's furnishings were an ode to minimalism: two futons, one turquoise and one silver, were rolled up Japanese-style and leaning against the wall opposite the windows. They were made of cotton because the two refused to sleep on other people's feathers. In one corner there was a small kitchen and in a storage room the power station, with bio-luminescent bacteria and all the rest. Sidus' feminine touch was evident in the remarkable variety of fungal compositions, coloured in a sober, sometimes flamboyant manner. They had adopted several Lucifer mushrooms (always in odd numbers) with which they managed to communicate, though it is

not clear how. So, on the windowsills of the slightly arched windows and on the furniture inside the loft, communities of fungi and lichens coexisted, brightening up the environment and contributing to the increase in light, but also to the purple hue of the reflections, at least during the day.

— I'm starting to feel hungry, Cal. Shall we go and say hello to the grand master and then head straight to the Two Octavias?

— Good idea.

Through the door of tears (why it was called that was an esoteric question that should not concern simple interstitials), they reached the square of the *mansio*, where Grand Master Teobaldo was contemplating the roundness of the building. The plutonic light of the late afternoon (semi-darkness) caressed the chitin slabs of the mansio, forcing them to emit reflections that turned purple due to the numerous Luciferi. The frenzy of distributing the clone had also infected the assassins who, like the others, had received it and spread it, filling every niche, every attenuated ogive, every available crack. Grand Master Teobaldo was concerned about this, as it could distract men from their faith, but since times were difficult and worse ones were looming, he preferred to say nothing so as not to dampen morale. The building the Grand Master was contemplating at that moment was constructed of chitin plates welded together to form a polyhedron that evoked the irregular roundness of a masculine tower. In the angular polyhedral roundness, there were several windows with attenuated ogives and a door (also with an attenuated ogive): the golden door (another esoteric matter of no interest) that led inside the mansio. Since the Assassins were more esoteric than inclusive, no simple reticular had ever been to their home to see what it was like. The warriors had granted the stable on a short lease, more because Dino Sala was involved than for any other reason. Grand Master Teobaldo looked even more serious than Tapis, with a dirty white skirt that reached down to his flip-flops, his only concession to interstitial fashion. He wore a chitin-coloured cloak with a hood, under which his hair was more white than grey, and a long beard of the same colour. His nose was more aquiline than Stromboli's beak, evoking ancient Semitic lineages, while his

large black eyes seemed to contemplate mystical depths inaccessible to most.

— What do you think, friends, of the niche we added to the *mansio* to highlight the hologram? I think it's remarkable. — asked the grand master in a serious tone, staring at horizons known only to him.

Calipso and Flieg just wanted to say hello to the grand master, and not discuss aesthetic issues, but it seemed polite to make some kind of comment.

— Ah... oh... uh... yes... very apt. — Calipso trying to make sense of monosyllables.

Above the attenuated ogive of the golden door, inside a circular rose window (a love of round shapes that perhaps came from the Middle East?), the hologram of the assassins shone with sodium light. At an hour that could have been late afternoon or early evening, when the Lucifers, due to their circadian rhythm, stopped chatting and contributing to the illumination of the Tunnel, the talking head of the Assassins glowed more intensely. It seemed that the Luciferi had evolved between the tropics and the equator (lucky them), because their rhythm was exactly twelve hours awake and twelve hours asleep. Since the colour was sodium, the talking head gave off a metallic glow, albeit opaque; its ears were different from each other, one evoking a male and the other a female, and it had a funnel-shaped mouth with something that looked like blood inside. Flieg, who had already seen a similar hologram in Utica, expected the sacred burp at any moment, that is, the dark stuff (blood?) to come out of its mouth and drip onto a sheet (also holographic) underneath. Symbols would then form on the sheet, which would have to be interpreted according to some ancient mystery. A moment after the sacred burp, Calipso and Flieg took the opportunity to thank the grand master for his hospitality and leave. The assassins' *mansio* was one of the points of interest in the Tunnel, along with the Pastafarian Church at the other end of beautiful Zama, the Trasimeno avenue and the Chitin Forks. Anyone who came to Zama was entranced by the tower of the assassins, as Grand Master Teobaldo seemed to be at that moment. In a moment of self-celebration, provided he was not thinking about unfathomable

esoteric questions, he looked with fascination at the mighty and multifaceted assassin tower, which filled much of the widening of the Tunnel and filled his soul with wonder.

Divination

One of the advantages of the Tunnel is that it never rains. There is no threat of hail, storms, tropical cyclones or anything else. So, all events can be organised outdoors without having to worry about various weather threats. There was also another reason for organising the event outdoors: anyone passing by would stop, intrigued by the unusual movement of reticular and feathered creatures; it would have been impossible to contain them all in the polyploid loft.

— Do you think those fish are sacrificial, Cal?

— In my opinion, they are for the ritual banquet.

On the day chosen for the divination, Calipso and Flieg, in their capacity as public relations officers, were required to be present during the preparations, while the others would arrive at the start of the ceremony. The sacrificial altar had been moved to the centre of the square and the mid-morning twilight bounced off the table with purple glints. Arranged in a circle around the altar (a sign of love for roundness perhaps inherited from classical antiquity?) were chairs, benches and tables. In a chitin basket, near the sacred grill, nine fish were arranged in an orderly row, looking as if they were on display for sale in a local market in Palermo before the implosion. Trans and Sidus were busy with the preparations, their pens and feathers swollen and sparkling from the sacred bath the day before, checking and directing everything. Calipso had not renounced transparency but wore sober Bermuda shorts, appropriate for the occasion; her earrings were still liver-shaped out of respect for the ceremony. Flieg's blue Bermuda shorts, with vertical white stripes reminiscent of the pinstripes of mafia bosses of the past, had just been ironed and were still creased; his elegant flip-flops gave off purple reflections, in keeping with those emanating from the *mansio*,

immersed in the metamorphic twilight of mid-morning. The twilight was metamorphic (turning purple) due to the intense chatter of the Luciferi, who were exchanging opinions on the current event as well as talking about the weather and the amount of mineral salts in the substrate. The hologram of the assassins, in the round niche, was a little less noticeable than in the evening or at night, but continued to emit its sacred burps as if nothing had happened. Grand Master Teobaldo, safe inside the multifaceted roundness of the mansion, watched the preparations, perhaps regretting his excessive generosity. He consoled himself with the thought that Dino Sala owed him a favour in any case.

The liturgy required that the divine fish be grilled to perfection by professionals. For this reason, the two Octavias and Furia Tranquilla oversaw the correct arrangement of the grill and the supply of wood. The two Octavias were in full uniform: triple chignons at the nape of their necks, combat sticks slung over their shoulders and tactical boots with neoprene soles. Furia Tranquilla displayed, as usual, an unknown number of piercings that sparkled in the dim light, her skull shaved in an orthodox interstitial style and her usual service attire in addition to tactical boots. As always, no one could tell whether her massive appearance was due to muscle or fat.

- Cali, I don't see any sacrificial animals to rip the livers out of.
- Let's wait and see what happens, we're almost there.
- Gosh... do you think they're going to sacrifice one of us?
- Stop it.

Five minutes before the ceremony began, all the other members of the Tunnel company had arrived. Flieg, who had said he was sure Draula had consulted white noise to arrive on time, then remembered that for the future (and for the moment) Marcello and Draula couldn't do anything, and besides, a ceremony was about to begin whose purpose was precisely to know the future; consequently, he dropped the matter into the storeroom of useless thoughts. The fact that Draula and her additional aspects were so calm reassured him. When Draula was nervous, her blue hair lost its perfect alignment with infinity (on the other side of the centre of the earth) and moved in accordance with the little alien's thoughts, like a

flame in search of calm air. At that moment, they yearned, beyond any doubt, for infinity. Draula's fashion choice for the ceremony was curious: ornithological because her shorts and tank top were canary yellow, but also palindromic because she was wearing electric blue flip-flops. She resembled a double-headed torch (with blue poles and a yellow centre) sensitive to gravitational emanations. Vic and Schwà looked like people hoping the ceremony would be over quickly so they could get to the banquet. Perhaps Vic's lithium ions were in need of amperage; he was wearing an elegant red and silver suit, with a tank top that was on the verge of tearing. Tapis, as always, contemplated infinite horizons despite being confined to his multi-purpose jacket. A number of simple interstitials were gathering around the sacrificial altar, all certain that from that day forward the square would be called that for reasons of historical memory.

— Here they come! — warned Tapis.

Perhaps thanks to the ritual bath they had taken the day before, their plumage was at its best. Aulus Transustanziatius displayed his hypnotic turquoise colouring, and as aruspex he stood to the left of Velia Sibilla Sidus, who emanated silvery-purple glows and held something that looked like a tablet in her hand. As soon as they arrived at the altar, a sniffing rat emerged from the door of tears, its brown fur streaked with purple, due to the glow of the dim light. It seemed sure of what it was doing, going without hesitation to the fish basket and then crouching down (like dogs used to do) and looking around curiously.

— Could they really want to quarter that rat for its liver?

— No Flieg — said Tapis calmly — that's Serafino, the grand master's sniffer rat. I think he's curious to see what's going on.

— Ah...

The feathered ones, who had been waiting for the mouse near the altar, took action with a noble gesture from Velia Sibilla, who had given the tablet to the haruspex Transustanziatius; he had turned it on and placed it on the sacrificial table, then pressed a button. While the software was running, he explained to everyone present that they were experiencing a solemn moment. Unlike in the past, Trans explained to those gathered, when divinations were bloody and

animals, if not humans, were quartered so that their entrails could be examined and omens drawn, things were different nowadays. It was preferable to use probability calculations to divine the future. While Velia Sibilla simulated a liturgical trance, Transustanziatius continued by saying that it had been understood that there was not much difference between examining an entrail (liver or whatever) and resorting to predictive calculations. Both were based on arbitrary assumptions, so it was preferable not to spill blood, except to make a nice liturgical barbecue once the divination was over. As soon as the sacred number was spat out by the software, he would pass the word to Velia Sibilla Sidus, who would take care of the interpretation.

— Unbelievable, eh? — commented Flieg in amazement. — No bloodshed, no liver examined, and all the rest.

— For me, it's important to start eating, it's almost lunchtime now...

— Battery down, Vic?

— Nice one, Flieg, I think the predictive number has just been generated, — observed Calipso.

Aulus Transustanziatius was convinced that sixty-nine was an excellent number. For one thing, it was an odd number, and the sum of its two digits always resulted in an odd number, so the fact that it was made up of two digits, reminiscent of the annoying dualism, was of secondary importance. And then, on closer inspection, the two numbers were complementary: just turn the number 180 degrees, either to the right or to the left. Not to mention the fact that the two members were interchangeable: if you turn a six upside down, you get a nine, and vice versa. In short, it was a magic number, and he was convinced that Velia Sibilla would find it very auspicious. Meanwhile, Velia Sibilla had returned from her simulated liturgical trance and immediately asked how many fish were in the box near the grill. When she was told there were nine, her eyes, usually only seductive, lit up with silver flashes. It was a clear sign: first of all, it was one of the two numbers in the predictive number (but also the other one upside down), which was already a very good thing. And then it was a multiple of three, which, as everyone knows, is the perfect number as well as being the first, not to

mention the fact that it is the odd number per excellence. He said that there was no need to consult the nine Sibylline books or Tarquinius Superbus to be convinced that they were facing an exceptional, metaphysical, perhaps esoteric event. There were nine fish, and this would be the prophecy of the nine fish, she announced to the Tunnel and the whole world.

— Guys, do you think it's all staged or is it real?

— What difference would it make, Flieg?

— Quiet, everyone, Velia Sibilla is delivering her prophecy. Let's listen with optimism — said Tapis with his usual solemnity.

— Let's hope it's quick, I'm starving... aren't you, Cali?

— Flieggy, come on...

To begin with, Velia claimed, they (the reticulars) were the chosen people, or the favoured ones, she couldn't quite remember, but something like that. They were, even if they didn't know it. They could decide which god they worshipped, if they hadn't already done so, because she didn't care: every people has its own god, and so on and so forth. Her job was to make prophecies and divinations, not to attribute them to this or that god. She only recommended that they pay attention to the terms of the contract. She knew for a fact that some gods were crafty and didn't include a withdrawal clause, in which case it could be difficult to get rid of them. She added that since she was beginning to feel a little peckish, she would move on to divination straight away. In the meantime, Aulus Transustanziatius had turned off the tablet that had generated the sacred number and made room for the box of *pisces divini*, so that Velia Sibilla could examine and comment on them without wasting any more time, because he too was beginning to feel a little hungry. Velia Sibilla had to be sure that the fish were already in a precise esoteric order because, with a clinical eye and expert manner, she had grabbed the first two. Seeing that the first was a tench and the second a sea bream, her comment, made aloud so that more or less everyone could hear, was: — Umpf... table fish — but then, noticing that one was from the river and one from the sea (clearly representing the ecumene), she declared that the chosen people were (once) in a state of subjugation that could be defined as proto-reticular. In a

state of subjugation, she specified, like a fish participating in a banquet as the second course. Velia Sibilla emphasised that she was talking about the past, but at a certain point she would also talk about the present and then the future.

— The chick is taking a bit of time — said Flieg, immediately regretting the comparison because of the feathers. — At this rate, what time will we be eating?

— Take these for now and keep an eye on the comments — Calipso handed Flieg a chitin bag full of pact berries.

— Can I have some too? — Vic's battery is running low.

Velia Sibilla proceeded with the divination, handing the interpreted fish to Transustanziatu, who had gutted them and lined them up on a liturgical plate; the entrails ended up under Serafino's nose. The meaning was clear to everyone: if Serafino ate with gusto the prophecy was confirmed; if not, it was denied. Meanwhile, Velia Sibilla had grabbed the next fish. Seeing that it was an eel, she let out a loud comment: — Ah... the herpetetic slime — After a second's hesitation, Sibilla interpreted that the chosen people in their proto-network state (before the implosion) were trapped by the charm of the techno-feudal sirens, or neoliberals or something like that, in short, those who had money (power). Serafino's ritual of evisceration and subsequent metabolisation proceeded without a hitch. Indeed, after recycling the fish entrails, the mouse looked at the feathered creatures as if to say: — When's the rest coming? — Wagging its tail like the dogs of old. A clear sign that everything was going well.

— Vedi Cali che qualcuno alla fine viene sbudellato?

— Già finite le bacche Flieg?

Velia Sibilla continued, lost in her ecstatic-fish predictions. The piranha meant that proto-network pride had resulted in the slimy techno-feudal lords getting kicked in the ass (implosion); the carp evoked stability and therefore referred to the spread of network culture; the predatory barracuda suggested that the fledgling civilisation had suffered fierce attacks (metal and assassins); the mackerel had no idea what it evoked other than apathy and resignation, but if anyone had any ideas, they were welcome..

— Wende's fish...

— For overcooked pasta! You might be right, Flieg. — Vic said with a Pastafarian joke, perhaps because he was very hungry.

— There's only one fish left, guys... it must be the one from the future — Tapis deduced logically.

With a certain solemnity, Velia Sibilla grabbed the last fish and, before even thinking about it, uttered a meaningful comment: — By the tentacles of the Prodigious One... it's a pike! — This told everyone that she was familiar with the Pastafarian religion and that something unpleasant was almost certainly to be expected. To confirm that something unpleasant was coming, Sibilla interpreted that the pike, being a cunning and ruthless predator that hides among the river vegetation to snatch its prey, could only evoke great danger. A danger never before experienced in the Tunnel. Then Velia paused to think carefully about what she was about to say. The semi-darkness of midday in the Tunnel illuminated the square with purple flashes. The extra handful of lumens, due to the chatter of the luciferi, who seemed indifferent to the cryptic prophecy or perhaps commenting on it, contrasted with the sacred sodium burp of the talking head of the assassins, which glowed in its niche, embedded in the roundness of the Tower. The twilight emphasised the anticipation.

— My dear friends — said Velia Sibilla Sidus solemnly — I'm afraid you'll have to hold on tight. I can't see it clearly, but the pike speaks for itself: predatory, cunning, ruthless and greedy. Sooner or later, someone will come along who wants to kill you and steal everything you have (anti-tunnel?). But there's always the chance to break his back, or something else, in short, to kill him; like us now (was she speaking with the plural *divinationis*?) — let's gut this fish — she added. — But since it won't be today or tomorrow, I suggest we proceed with the sacred banquet because it's getting late.

The negativity of the divination had been confirmed by Serafino, the sniffing rat. He had snubbed the pike's entrails, although it is not known whether the refusal was due to something esoteric or to the fact that he was already full. The flickering embers of the fire, now ready for the sacred banquet, evoked the Hades of classical

antiquity, if not the more recent lava flows of Mount Etna in Sicily. The two Ottavias and Furia Tranquilla, who formed a close-knit trio (it is really unnecessary to point out the odd number once again), had prepared the grill on which the nine fish were to be roasted with scrupulous professionalism. The ritual dictated that the fish were reserved for the nine members of the Tunnel Company because the divination was dedicated to them. Vic had set aside some mackerel to take to Wende, showing that an android was capable of compassion, something not always within the reach of many simple humans. The chitin picnic tables had been opened and arranged around the altar, and everyone who had found a place sat down ready to devour the sacrificial food, as well as all the delicacies that the two Octavias and Furia Tranquilla had brought and stored in the polyploid loft. Since the divination was dedicated to the Tunnel company, they (the company) had covered the costs of the event with the bitcoins that had been at their disposal since the singularity. A perhaps better use (one might say) than what "rocas negra", whatever it was, intended to make of them.

It wasn't just the divine Pisces who were present for the last supper (of that day). There were mountains of pact berries on the tables as appetisers, proof that the Lucifers were not indifferent to divination. The appearance of interstitial delicacies on the tables was directly proportional to the kilometres that the girls, the Ottavias and Furia, covered going back and forth from the Piumati loft. The numerous bottles of red Interstiziale were paired with foaming mugs of Pastafarian beer. By pure chance, it was Friday, and many devout Pastafarians, after taking the sacrament of a plate of spaghetti with meat sauce, joined the celebrations to contribute to the gross internal happiness of the Tunnel (not to mention GDP). This once again highlighted (if ever it were necessary) the foresight of the new religion.

Perhaps attracted by the combination of *tigella alba et nigra*, with mouth-watering condiments, which came just after the red wine but before the berries of the pact, many assassins had joined the group, although they kept their distance from the devout Pastafarians. It was well known that practising Pastafarians and assassins would

fight one day and kiss each other the next. So, to avoid ruining the atmosphere, they kept a safe distance. Not to be outdone by Furia Tranquilla and her tigelle, the two Ottavias had proposed the fritters of prophecy, to be eaten with sixty-nine mixed sauces of mushrooms and hydroponic vegetables (once again, the magic number). For every three bottles of Interstiziale, there was one of prosecco, for refined palates.

— Guys, this anti-tunnel thing... should we be worried?

— If I were you, Flieg, I'd worry about eating. With the appetite those two (Trans and Sidus) have, the pancakes will be gone in no time. — Vic, careful as always.

Transustanziatu and Velia, as polyploids, not only had double the genetic makeup, but also double the appetite. Velia Sibilla cast languid glances at anyone who spoke to her. That veil of make-up made her eyes as bewitching as those of a sorceress. As haruspices, they were entitled to a privileged place at the table, which meant they could sit wherever they wanted. Because of her eyes, Velia was the most courted by the interstitial, who had a lot of curiosity to satisfy: whether she had always had feathers, whether she wore a bra under her feathers, what her plans were for the future, and so on. Transustanziatu chuckled at the questions, without stopping chatting with Flieg and Calypso, who were sitting next to him, but also with anyone who said anything to him. Calypso, who could transform his Bermuda shorts and tank tops, which were always the same (content?), into works of art, wore metamorphic earrings forged in the shape of mixed fried food, in empathy with the liturgical banquet.

The turquoise colour of Trans's feathers grew deeper and deeper, giving off purple and opaque reflections as he devoured the fritters of prophecy. Both he and Velia, who glowed like Saturn's rings, had a weakness for prosecco, as well as fritters. Like Vic, they had an enviable metabolism: the more they ate, the more beautiful and desirable they became. Between courses of fritters, the two feathered creatures smoothed their feathers, a gesture that corresponded to humans smoothing their hair, as Calypso did from time to time, wearing her hair down for the occasion, or tucking a

strand behind her ear so it wouldn't end up on her plate as she grabbed yet another fritter. In short, those small interstitial gestures that made the reticulars what they were and the feathered creatures the same. Draula, who was still a teenager and did not have that lustful attitude towards food, had been playing a variation of Zenon's lettuce with Etna in the courtyard for some time. Stromboli, for his part, watched everything and everyone imperturbably from his portable perch while chatting with Lucifer. Tapis, for once, had put aside his seriousness, slipping out of his multi-purpose jacket hanging on the chitin chair. He, who usually contemplated horizons so distant as to be unreachable, was for once enjoying the journey instead of thinking about the destination. Everyone thought that the various glasses of Interstiziale he had drunk played an important role in this change of attitude. He had even taken on a different colour, his usual ashen hue had turned into something more colourful, reminiscent of cooled lava. Which, in all likelihood, corresponded to the alcoholic hue of the noses of normal humans who drink a lot. Schwà had his work cut out for him to hide his disgust for the Interstiziale delicacies that were on the camping tables joined together for the occasion and formed a single continuum. He did so out of politeness towards his friends, and for everyone else, while sucking the infamous black slop (a mixture of ignoble catabolites) from a sealed thermos with a chitin straw, he tried to hide his grimaces of disgust. To better simulate this, he hid behind Vic's satin silver tank top. Since Vic, like Calypso for that matter, filled tank tops very well (whatever colour they were), the game worked quite well for him. Despite all this, the party was going strong towards its end, because it is well known even in the Tunnel that everything that has a beginning also has an end. The hologram of the Assassins, glowing with sodium light in its niche carved into the multifaceted roundness of the Tower, continued to emit its sacred burps, prophesying a future, perhaps good, perhaps not, knowable only through an esoteric philosophy of the past that no one remembered anymore.

Wende's mackerel

The late afternoon twilight was falling on the liturgical banquet. Vic, whose lithium ions were close to saturation, thought that the ceremony was not yet over. Not because the Lucifers were stopping their chatter and the glow of the Tunnel was slowly fading back to cobalt normality, but rather because of the ceremony itself; for it to be complete, Wende had to have her mackerel. Without needing to elbow Scwhà to tell him it was time to go home, she got up and took the takeaway box with the fish that the girls had prepared. Schwà, who had long since finished sucking the black slop from the thermos, followed her.

— Are you leaving already, Vic? We've only been eating for four hours... burp.

— I need to check Wende's pod, Flieg. And while I'm at it, I'll take him the mackerel.

— Ah! Well done, Vic. — Calypso with her metamorphic earrings shaped like barrels of aged grappa.

— See you tomorrow, everyone.

They had walked halfway down Trasimeno Avenue, which was almost deserted because everyone was still busy with their divination revelry, to get to Vic's house. In theory, Schwà lived with Vic, but he preferred to sleep in the hydroponic greenhouse a stone's throw away in the direction of the subsidiary agency. He found that the aerosol emitted by the circulating solution helped him sleep. Vic had furnished his space with a certain taste. In one corner was a bright orange futon that he rolled out in the evening to sleep on. Not that he needed sleep, he just took advantage of the fact that everyone else was asleep to go into standby mode and save energy. Since she felt an innocent, almost human love for small appliances, she had collected a collection of them: mixers, table lamps, razors, power banks and who knows what else, basically anything that had a USB port for charging. She felt a kind of attraction to these small objects; or rather, she drew emotional comfort from their presence. It was a bit like humans with animals before the implosion: dogs, cats, parrots and goldfish. She had placed them on a shelf between the kitchen and Wende's pod, and every night before going to sleep she dusted them. There was also some free space in her home for

unexpected needs; a very feminine thing.

The dim light of the tunnel entered through the door leading onto Trasimeno Avenue. Vic and Schwà's idea was to freeze-dry, or alternatively liquefy, the ritual mackerel and then add it to the pod's nutrient solution, perhaps with half a glass of wine. In this way, all the metabolites would reach Wende by osmosis. Absorbent capillaries extended from the back of membranous plates applied here and there on the skin (of Wende), all ending in the nutrient hopper, while hypodermic molecular threads extended from the belly (of the plates), grafting themselves into the capillaries of the catalectic. In short, the absorbent capillaries worked more or less like plant roots and the molecular threads like a widespread intravenous infusion, with the plates acting as a gateway (?). The pod was also equipped with a processor (normal, not quantum) that occasionally emitted a low-voltage (but not too low) electric shock for passive muscle training.

— I think it's better to liquefy Vic, what do you think? — Schwà said with his thick voice, pronouncing each word as if he had a stone in his mouth, in other words, with a Texan accent.

— Yes, let's get it done quickly.

— You don't need to turn off the power, right?

— No, you don't have to. Give me a moment to prepare everything.

Vic had chosen the blender from among his beloved kitchen appliances, thinking that the fact that everything had gone smoothly so far would have a positive impact on the immediate future. This was despite his logical circuits suggesting that the idea was nonsense.

— Half a glass of wine or five drops of Mikos with the mackerel. What do you say, Schwà?

— We used the wine yesterday, Vic. I'd say grappa this time. But take it easy...

— Clear. We're almost there...

The presence of some noble metabolites (alcohol) among the most common necessary metabolites (not that they were ignoble, of course) could only help the cataleptic, if only to have better dreams;

assuming he dreamed.

— Schwà, done. The mackerel is in the solution, — Vic announced after pouring the liquid into the feeding hopper. Satisfied with the work done and the consistency of the liquid, as well as its low alcohol content, she placed the blender on the chitin table with the intention of cleaning it thoroughly before putting it back in its place in the collection.

— Vic!

— Yeah, Schwà, go ahead. — Vic, turning towards his furry post-human friend.

— I didn't say anything, Vic.

— Then who was it? It's just you and me here and...

— Oh my God! — Vic brought her hands to her face, with a gesture more human than that of a simple human. Then she turned towards the pod and saw Wende sitting there, removing the membranes/gateways from his body one by one, wrinkling his nose slightly.

— Vic, thank you for everything you and the others have done for me, said Wende, pronouncing each word carefully.

— Wende... — Vic whispered as the darkness of night crept in uninvited through the door onto the Trasimeno avenue, and Schwà observed the man who had been reintegrated into the community of the conscious with post-human curiosity.

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